

Vol. LXVII, No. 11

\$3.95 U.S. / \$4.75 Can. / £1.95 U.K.

The World's First Science Fiction Magazine

# AMAZING<sup>®</sup>

## STORIES



1-56076-581-X

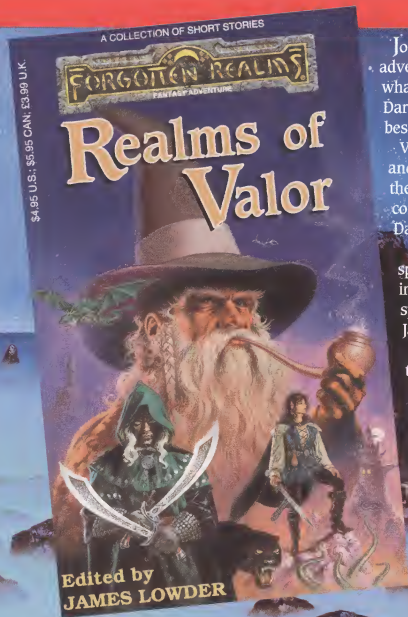


Gregory Benford  
Tanya Huff

Ben Bova  
Ian McDowell



## 11 All-New Tales by the Hottest Authors in this Magical World



Join your favorite heroes on their latest adventures. From R. A. Salvatore, find out what's new with Drizzt Do'Urden of the Dark Elf Trilogy and the *New York Times* best seller, *The Legacy*.

Visit the Moonshaes with Douglas Niles and catch up with characters featured in the Avatar and Empires trilogies, compliments of Troy Denning and David Cook.

Elminster the Sage, longtime spokeswizard, is the center of attention in Ed Greenwood's yarn. Christie Golden spins a chilling fable about Jander Sunstar, the elven vampire.

The Harpers series is represented, too, with stories by Jean Rabe, Elaine Cunningham, Scott Ciencin, James Lowder, and Mark Anthony.

Pick up the *Realms of Valor* anthology at book and hobby stores everywhere.

ISBN 1-56176-557-7

Sug. Retail \$4.95/CAN \$5.95/£3.99 U.K.

### NEW FROM TSR!



FORGOTTEN REALMS is a registered trademark of TSR, Inc. The TSR logo is a trademark owned by TSR, Inc. © 1995 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

# Land the best in science fiction today.



Discover  
the New

**AMAZING**  
STORIES  
Magazine!

- The world's oldest science fiction magazine
- Fascinating stories from top SF authors
- Dazzling, full-color fantasy art
- Full-size magazine format
- 96 pages of stories, reviews and more in every issue

**ORDER NOW AND SAVE 40% OFF THE COVER PRICE!** That's a savings of \$1.65 an issue, or like getting 10 issues FREE, with your 2-year subscription. Don't miss a single issue of **AMAZING® Stories!**

**Yes! Start my AMAZING® Stories subscription now.**

- ☐ New subscriber ☐ Renewal  
Please send a subscription to AMAZING® Stories for:  
☐ 2 years for \$55! (That's just \$2.29 an issue) 24 issues  
☐ 1 year for \$30! (That's just \$2.50 an issue) 12 issues

(Print) Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Country Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐ Money Order/Check

Account # \_\_\_\_\_

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration \_\_\_\_\_

Credit card holders,  
call TOLL FREE  
1-800-372-4667

Mail to: **AMAZING®**  
Stories, TSR, Inc.,  
P.O. Box 5695,  
Boston, MA 02206

Make checks payable to AMAZING  
Stories. Rates good in U.S. and  
Canada. Elsewhere add \$20.00 per  
year for surface delivery and \$60.00  
for air delivery. U.S. funds only.  
Cover price \$3.95-\$47.40 per year.  
Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.

AMAZING is a registered trademark owned by TSR, Inc. ©1992 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

# AMAZING<sup>®</sup>

## STORIES

# Contents



9



15

---

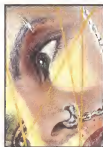
### THE LITTLE THINGS

- 4** Kim Mohan

---

### REFLECTIONS

- 5** Robert Silverberg



36

---

### FICTION

- 9** The Dark Backward by Gregory Benford
- 15** Last One Close the Door by Richard Chwedyk
- 24** Albert's Cradle by Paul Levinson
- 27** Nothing Up Her Sleeve by Tanya Huff
- 36** Metal Fatigue by Kathe Koja
- 41** Dark Glass by Steve Gross and Sasha Miller
- 47** With Love from the Plague Territories by Mark Rich
- 56** In the Realm of Pure Thought by Larry Tritten
- 77** In the Kingdom of Teeth by Ian McDowell



56



24



41

## NONFICTION

- 58** Forging the Elements by Stephen L. Gillett
- 61** About the Authors
- 62** Why Science Fiction? by Ben Bova
- 66** Tomorrow's Books compiled by Susan C. Stone and Bill Fawcett
- 94** Back Issues and Anthologies

## LOOKING FORWARD

- 70** Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson
- 74** A Wizard in Absentia by Christopher Stasheff



Cartoon by Mark Heath (page 93)

Cover Art by Laura and John Lakey



8160-02

Volume 67, Number 11  
(Whole Number 579)  
February 1993

### Publisher

Lorraine D. Williams

### Editor

Kim Mohan

### Assistant Editor

Janis Wells

### Editorial Assistant

Lisa Neuburger

### Design and Production

Sarah Feggestad

Paul Hanchette

Dawn Munn

### Marketing Manager

Jim Fallone

### Advertising Manager

Cindy Rick

### Circulation Manager

Janet Winters

**AMAZING® Stories** (ISSN 1058-0751) is published monthly by TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 1111 (201 Sheridan Springs Road), Lake Geneva WI 53147.

**Subscriptions:** The price of a subscription is \$30 for 12 issues (one year) sent to U.S. or Canadian addresses. For subscriptions sent to all other countries, the rates are \$50 for surface mail or \$90 for air mail.

**Note:** All subscriptions must be paid in advance in U.S. funds only. Prices are subject to change without notice. All subscription orders should be sent to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 5695, Boston MA 02206.

**Distribution:** Random House and its affiliate companies have worldwide distribution rights in the book trade for English language products. Distributed to the book and hobby trade in the United Kingdom by TSR Ltd.

**Submissions:** AMAZING Stories welcomes unsolicited submissions of fiction manuscripts. Guidelines for fiction writers are available by sending a #10 SASE to the Lake Geneva address. Illustrators and writers of nonfiction should query first and provide samples of published work.

AMAZING, the AMAZING logo, and FORGOTTEN REALMS are registered trademarks owned by TSR, Inc. RAVENLOFT, XXVC, and the TSR logo are trademarks owned by TSR, Inc.

Copyright ©1993 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Printed in the United States of America. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without permission is prohibited.

Second class postage paid at Lake Geneva, Wis., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 1111, Lake Geneva WI 53147.



# The Little Things

Kim Mohan

---

A while back, I did some fine-tuning of an essay and sent the edited version to the author for his approval. In one place I added a word, and I explained in the accompanying letter that I did this “for the sake of parallel construction.”

When the author returned the proofs of his work, he had this to say on that subject:

“You actually talk about things like parallel construction? You must be old, man!—at least 40. Or else you got your education at a parochial school. What a novelty for this day and age to hear an editor talking about such abstruse concepts! It’ll be the ablative absolute next, I betcha.”

Well, probably not. That’s too much of a leap even for a dedicated nit-picker like me—particularly since I had to look up “ablative absolute” to get even a glimmer of an idea what it means. (And I still don’t know much more than I did before.) But I *do* care about the little things. A large part of the time I spend in the production of each issue of this magazine is devoted to concerns such as parallel construction, dangling participles, unclear antecedents, nonrestrictive clauses, and split infinitives.

Why bother? In my mind, that question never comes up, because there is no question about whether these little things are important. The absence of small errors in grammar and syntax is what distinguishes a very good piece of writing from an essay or a story of superlative quali-

ty. It’s my job to work with a piece of writing that is 95% or 99% impeccable and bring it as close to 100% as possible. I enjoy being able to contribute to a published product that’s as good as I and the writer can make it. I never *like* having to correct an error, in the sense that I take a perverse pleasure in finding other people’s mistakes, but it is gratifying for me to know that the stuff that’s printed in this magazine is better for my having looked at it.

I don’t think the fact that I care about parallel construction and that other stuff makes me unique. I know of several fellow editors who are sticklers for correctness just as I am (including, to name a couple, my two immediate predecessors in this job). But I also think that editors who *edit* are becoming an endangered species—not enough new ones are coming up to replace those who eventually leave the profession.

And while I’m at it, I’ll expand that observation to include the professionals in our education system. When I walked into the office this very morning, already planning to do this month’s column on this topic, the first thing Janis did was relate a story to me about the instructor of a college-level class she’s taking at night. She used the term “free rein” in a paper, and the person who’s responsible for grading her performance crossed it out and wrote “free reign” in the margin. Not being able to identify an error, or not caring enough to fix it, is one thing; chang-

ing something that’s correct into something that’s not is—from a stickler’s point of view—downright reprehensible.

Professional writers, by and large, are as meticulous as they are creative. They not only know how to tell a good story, or how to make a point coherently and convincingly, they also know how to use the language correctly and effectively. I’m not trying to suggest that no writer is capable of being his own editor and proofreader—in fact, the list of people who’ve submitted squeaky-clean manuscripts to me is longer than I could reproduce in the space remaining on this page. They produce writing that needs the least amount of editing—and by that token, deserves the very best attention I can give it.

Looking from the other end of the spectrum, one of the many qualities that separates the established professional writer from the well-meaning wannabe is that appreciation for the little things—a quality that may not be evident to the average reader, but which is easy for an editor to perceive. It seems that a lot of the people who want to get their work published are relying, purposely or otherwise, on an editor to help make them look good. In my mind, that’s not what an editor should do. I can tell when a writer cares about the little things as much as I do—and that’s the kind of writer I’ll choose to work with every chance I get. ♦

# Reflections

## Robert Silverberg

Some months back we launched an actual contest in this column—asking readers to send in lists of great moments in history (or prehistory, as it turned out) that they would be most eager to see if they could send a movie camera back in time. And now—appropriate fanfare, please—we are finally able to reveal the names of the winners and share their winning suggestions with you.

All this began when I came across an essay by Vladimir Nabokov in which he listed some scenes out of times gone by that he would like to see filmed. Nabokov's list, characteristically playful, included such things as Poe's wedding, Lewis Carroll's picnics, Shakespeare playing the part of the King's Ghost, and "Herman Melville at breakfast, feeding a sardine to his cat."

I took it from there, offering a list of my own dozen favorites:

—Mark Antony's funeral oration for Caesar.

—Mozart at the age of seven or eight, giving a harpsichord concert for the Austro-Hungarian nobility.

—Michelangelo rubbing his sore neck as he goes about the job of painting the Sistine chapel.

—Robert A. Heinlein appearing out of nowhere in a white dinner jacket to accept the Hugo he has just won.

—Napoleon crowning himself Emperor.

—Jefferson showing a rough draft of the Declaration of Independence to Madison, Adams, and Franklin.

—Beethoven rehearsing the premiere performance of one of his symphonies with a tired, cranky orchestra that doesn't understand it.

—Attila the Hun having dinner with his pals after a hard day's pillaging.

—Columbus on his flagship, giving the order to set sail for the Indies.

—Moses coming down from Mount Sinai.

—The grassy knoll at Dallas, November 22, 1963, seen from several camera angles.

—Homer reciting the just-finished *Iliad* to a group of Athenian literary critics.

I asked you to send in your own lists. No prizes were offered, other than the chance to win the traditional fifteen minutes of glorious fame by seeing your name in print. (That was a gross deception. Prizes will in fact be awarded. See below.)

Reader lists came thundering in by the twos and threes, until we had a stack of entries well over a millimeter thick. Kim Mohan and I have spent the intervening months leafing through them, selecting our individual favorites from the vast throngs of entries and then battling vigorously with each other over the choice of finalists. There was a good deal of overlap in our preferences, but there were subtle differences, too. For example, I chose four items from one entrant's list, and so did Kim—and three of the four that I picked turned up as Kim's choices also. But the

fourth—ah, the fourth! Elitist old me opted to watch Leonardo da Vinci painting the "Mona Lisa"; leering voyeur Mohan wanted to peer through the window of Marilyn Monroe's bedroom in the last sad moments of her life. Well, there's no accounting for tastes, I told our peerless editor. And we awarded one of the two top prizes to the entry.

Another contestant turned in a list of nine. Four of them rang the bell for me, and Kim independently concurred on two of those four. We agreed that this was our other top prizewinner.

As for the two second prizes, one went to a contestant who tickled Mohan's fancy with two suggestions and mine with one. The other second-prize winner scored also scored twice for Mohan and once for me.

I found the duplication of certain entries worth noting. Three contestants wanted to see the dinosaurs clobbered by the asteroid. (We gave the prize to the one who preferred to survey the scene six months after the impact and added, "Who would want to be around the day it actually hit?") Four contestants wanted to look in on the building of the Pyramids. Leonardo at work on the "Mona Lisa" had two entries. So did the idea of peeking at Marilyn Monroe, though one wanted a glimpse of her suicide and the other was curious about her alleged affairs with the Kennedy brothers. Noah and his Ark got double attention, as did the Crucifixion.

Here, in no particular order, are

the Mohan-Silverberg favorites among your favorite time-machine wish-list scenes:

—The parting of the Red Sea. Did it part to the side, or straight down the middle?

—Troy celebrating a hard-fought victory over the Greeks by dragging a giant wooden horse into their city, 1300 B.C.

—Pericles' funeral oration.

—The Nixon-Haldeman conversation on the 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-minute gap in the White House tapes.

—The first swarm of sea-dwelling creatures crawling out from the primordial ocean onto the steamy, rocky shore of a desolate land mass.

—In the kitchen during the moments Robert Kennedy entered and was then assassinated. Later, looking in the window of Marilyn Monroe's room before and during her last moments of life.

—In Leonardo da Vinci's studio as he painted his "Mona Lisa." (The scene should clearly show the hundreds of goofy poses da Vinci had to do to get her to smile.)

—The raising of Lazarus.

—A great festival at Avebury, when that wonderful megalithic site was at the height of its importance in pre-historic English society.

—Six months after the "dinosaur killer" asteroid impacted with the Earth.

—In the bunker with Hitler during the final hours of the Third Reich.

—Amelia Earhart landing her Lockheed Electra somewhere in the Pacific, 1937.

—The U.F.O. crash at Roswell, New Mexico, 1949.

—The last night at Sodom and Gomorrah. (It must have been some hell of a party!)

—Marco Polo meeting Kublai Khan.

—The dogfight between Sir William Stephenson and Lothar von Richtofen during World War I.

—The sack of Constantinople in 1204 (on a double bill with the fall of the city to the Turks in 1453).

And the winners—

Alan Vincent Michaels of Victor, New York, and Frederick Graboske of Rockville, Maryland (who used a piece of White House stationery for his entry!), each receive significant public attention in this space plus two-year subscriptions to AMAZING® Stories for having rung the chimes here with at least four entries each.

J. B. Neumann of San Francisco and Gregory Urbach of Reseda, California, who each managed to please Mohan and Silverberg with three items, get one-year subscriptions.

And—though he doesn't get a tangible prize—I do want to give a special award for singleminded persistence to Maurice Gamholz of Manhattan Beach, California, who submitted a list of eighteen entries, all of which had to do with the bedroom activities of the famous. (Among them: Cleopatra and various lovers; Guinevere and Lancelot; King Solomon and one of his 711 playmates; and, a particular commendation for *chutzpah*, the wedding night of Joseph and Mary. Mr. Gamholz tossed in the conception of Jesus as an extra, but observed that "perhaps there will be washed-out film from excessive overexposure to bright light.")

And—for sheer down-to-earth practicality—a round of applause for Michael Bullock of Marshfield, Massachusetts, who, after expressing a desire to see such things as the Pyramids as they originally looked and the opening of the tomb of Tut-an-kh-Amen, also asked for a replay of his trip to the movies with some friends last week, in order "to figure out exactly where, when, and how I lost one of my favorite hats, and to see if maybe the janitor picked it up."

Mr. Bullock probably isn't going to find out. Nor are any of the other wishes of our contestants very likely to be granted. We simply aren't going to get a chance to see newsreels of the dinosaurs in their prime, I suspect, or King Arthur being named as heir to the throne of Britain, or the Salem witch trials.

But all the contestants' lists—and mine, and Vladimir Nabokov's—remind us once again of why we read science fiction. We want to see with our own eyes all the wonders, marvels, miracles of the remote past and the infinite future. And, because we know that we can't, we are willing to settle for the best available verbal simulations of them. At least, that's what drew me to science fiction when I was a small boy stumbling in awe on the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, and what holds me as a reader today. I think, looking at these lists, that many of you feel the same way.

My thanks to all of the participants for a couple of hours of high-level entertainment. ♦



# DragonLance

Saga

The dramatic conclusion to the Meetings Sextet!

The New York Times Best-Selling Series

**DragonLance**®  
Sage

## THE COMPANIONS

Tina Daniell



The Meetings Sextet  
Volume Six

## THE COMPANIONS

Away on a sea errand, Caramon, Sturm, and Tasslehoff are transported by a magical windstorm to Mithas, kingdom of the minotaurs, where Tasslehoff mysteriously turns against his friends. . . .

Back in Solace, Raistlin convinces Flint and Tanis that they must make a perilous journey to Mithas. Their task: not only to rescue their friends, but also to defeat the Nightmaster of the minotaurs, who plans to conquer Krynn.

*The Companions* by Tina Daniell, the sixth and concluding volume of the Meetings Sextet, unites the cast of the **DragonLance**® series for the first time. And it's on sale now at book and hobby stores everywhere!

ISBN 1-56076-340-X

Sug. Retail \$4.95/CAN \$5.95

The entire Meetings Sextet is available now



**Kindred Spirits**  
Volume One  
By Mark Anthony &  
Ellen Porath  
ISBN 1-56076-069-9  
Sug. Retail \$4.95/  
CAN \$5.95



**Wanderlust**  
Volume Two  
By Mary Kirchoff &  
Steve Winter  
ISBN 1-56076-115-6  
Sug. Retail \$4.95/  
CAN \$5.95



**Dark Heart**  
Volume Three  
By Tina Daniell  
ISBN 1-56076-116-4  
Sug. Retail \$4.95/  
CAN \$5.95



**The Oath and the Measure**  
Volume Four  
By Michael Williams  
ISBN 1-56076-336-1  
Sug. Retail \$4.95/  
CAN \$5.95



**Steel and Stone**  
Volume Five  
By Ellen Porath  
ISBN 1-56076-339-6  
Sug. Retail \$4.95/  
CAN \$5.95

## NEW FROM TSR!

DragonLance is a registered trademark owned by TSR, Inc. The TSR logo is a trademark owned by TSR, Inc. ©1995 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.



# Letters

Greetings:

I want to congratulate everyone responsible on a great magazine. I like the new size and format; I think you've made a change for the better. The stories and articles are very good and enjoyable if not always understandable. My latest favorite is the serialized "The Ship Who Searched" by Anne McCaffrey and Mercedes Lackey, the first story to grab and hold my attention in a long time.

The "Looking Forward" section has led me to a few good reads. It's nice to get a taste of a book before putting money down on it. Sure, one can do that in the bookstore, but it's much better when someone points out the best part to get a taste of. The "Tomorrow's Books" section I like because it allows me to see a wide range of upcoming releases, but I miss a good book review now and again. The artwork is especially great and well appreciated.

Philip K. Jordan  
Needles CA

Dear Editor,

Here's my opinion on which stories, published in recent issues of your magazine, I liked best.

My favorite story thus far is "Gunfight at Bertha's Saloon" by Thomas R. McDonough. Other stories I liked include "Missing Person" by William F. Wu, "Blades of the Diram Ring" by Barry B. Longyear, and "The Ship Who Searched" by Anne McCaffrey and Mercedes Lackey.

Stories I'm not too fond of are those that take historical figures and put them into different situations. Of course there are exceptions—"Against the Night" by V. E. Mitchell is a good example. But please continue to be selective with this genre; it wears thin quickly.

Richard S. Jansen  
Marcellus NY

—

Dear Editor,

I trust you are still looking for ideas

for the magazine, and if so, here are some small ones.

Poetry: Get yourself a copy of *Ellery Queen* to see how that magazine handles poetry. It is specialized, but I enjoy what they do, and I think it would be good for *Amazing Stories*.

Volume number: This is all very good, but I would find designation by month much more satisfactory to your clientele. Both serve a purpose, but they are different.

Since you have taken over control of the SF magazine to which I have subscribed since 1926 I have been interested in all you have been doing for it. However, since your control I have been less and less interested in "Looking Forward." I think it is expendable.

I can even stomach serials now that I have a backlog so that I don't lose track of what the stories are subjectwise.

Basically, I like your work.

W. F. Poynter  
Santa Rosa CA

## "the button" Earns 1992 Rhysling Award

The 1992 Rhysling Award for long poem has been awarded to "the button, and what you know," written by W. Gregory Stewart and originally published in the June 1991 issue of *AMAZING\* Stories*.

The work was judged by the members of the Science Fiction Poetry Association (SFPA) to be the best in its category among all long poems published in 1991. In the short poem category, the winner was "Song of the Martian Cricket" by David Lunde, which appeared

in the December 1991 issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. Both of the Rhysling Award winners will be reprinted in the upcoming *Nebula Awards 28* anthology, to be published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Stewart is now a two-time Rhysling Award winner; his "Daedalus" was the winner of the 1987 award, also in the long poem category. "the button, and what you know" was also honored earlier by being nominated for the 1991 Nebula

Award for Best Short Story—believed to be the first time that a work has been named on both the Rhysling and Nebula ballots.

All of the nominated poems are included in the 1992 Rhysling Anthology, which can be ordered for \$3.00 from the Science Fiction Poetry Association, 2012 Pyle Road, Schenectady NY 12303. Anyone interested in obtaining a membership in the SFPA can get more information by writing to that address.

# THE DARK BACKWARD

Gregory Benford



Illustration by  
Walter Velez

WALTER  
VELEZ  
1992

The fearful wrenching snap, a sickening swerve—and she was there.

Vitrova found herself in a dense copse of trees, branches swishing overhead in a fitful breeze. Shotty Wood, she hoped. But was the time and place truly right? She had to get her bearings.

Not easy, in the wake of the Transition. She was still groggy from stretched moments in the slim, cushioned cylinder. All that aching time her stomach had knotted and roiled, fearing that intercession awaited the Transition's end. A squad of grim Corpse-men, an injunction. A bleak prospect of standing at the docket for meddling in the sanctified past, a capital crime.

But when the wringing pop echoed away, there was no one awaiting to erase her from time's troubled web. Only this scented night, musky with leaves and a wind promising fair.

She worked her way through prickly bushes and boggy glades, using her small flashlight as little as she could. A white beam cutting the darkness of an April night in 1616 would surely cause alarm.

She stumbled into a rough country lane wide enough to see the sky. A sliver of bleached moon, familiar star-sprinklings—and there, Polaris. Knowing north, she reckoned from her topo map which way the southward-jutting edge of Stratford might be. This lane led obliquely that way, so she took it, wind whipping her locks in encouragement.

Much still lay to be learned; she could be far off in space and time, but so far the portents were good. If the combined ferretings and guesses of generations of scholars proved true, this was the last night the aging playwright would be afoot. A cusp moment in a waning life.

Up ahead, hollow calls. A thin blade of yellow as a door opened. A looming shamble-shadow of a drunken man, weaving his ragged course away from the inky bulk of an inn. Might this be the one she sought? Not the man, no, for they were fairly sure that graying Will had spent the night's meaty hours with several friends.

But the inn might be the place where he had drunk his last. The vicar of Stratford's Holy Trinity Church, John Ward, had written years after this night that the bard had "been on an outing" with two lesser literary lights. There were probably only a few inns in so small a town, and this might be the nearest to Shakespeare's home.

Should. Might. Probably. Thin netting indeed, to snare hard facts.

She left the lane and worked through brush that caught at her cloak of simple country burlap. A crude weave covering a cotton dress, nothing lacy to call attention, yet presentably ladylike—she hoped. Considering the sexual fascinations of the ancients, she might easily be mistaken for a common harlot, or a village slut about for a bit of fun.

Any contact with others here would endanger her, to say nothing of definitely breaking the Codes. Of course, she was indeed flagrantly violating the precepts regulating time travel, but years of preparation had hardened her to that flat fact, insulating her from any lingering moral confusions.

She slipped among trees, trying to get a glimpse through the tiny windows of the inn. Her heart thudded, breath coming quick. The swarming smells of this place! In her antiseptic life, a third-rank Literary Historian in the University Corps, she had never before felt herself so immersed in history, in the thick air of a world innocent of steel and ceramic, of concrete and stale air.

She fished her senso-binoculars from her concealed pack and studied the windows. It was difficult to make out much through the small, warped panes and heavy leading, behind which men lifted tankards and flapped their mouths, illuminated by dim, uncertain candles. A fat man waved his arms, slopping drink. *Robustious rothers in rural rivo rhapsodic. Swill thou then among them, scribe thine ale's laughter.* Not Will's words, but some contemporary. Marlowe? Whoever, they certainly applied here. A ragged patch of song swept by on the stirring wind, carried from an opening door.

Someone coming out. She turned up the amps on the binoculars and saw three men, each catching the swath of lantern light as they helped each other down stubby stairs to the footpath.

Three! One large and balding, a big chest starting to slide into an equatorial belly. Yet still powerful, commanding, perhaps the manner of a successful playwright. Ben Jonson?

The second younger, short, in wide-brimmed hat—a Warwickshire style of the time, she recalled. It gave him a rakish cast, befitting a poet. Michael Drayton?

And coming last, tripping on the stair and grasping at his friends for purchase, a mid-sized man in worn cloak and close-fitting cap. *Life brief and naught done*, she remembered, a line attributed—perhaps—to this wavering apparition. But not so, not so.

The shadowy figure murmured something, and Vitrova cursed herself for her slowness. She telescoped out the directional microphone above the double barrels of the binoculars. It clicked, popped, and she heard—

"I was then bare a man, nay, a boy still," the big man said.

"Big in what fills, sure speak." The wide-hatted man smirked.

"Swelled in blood-fled lustihead, Ben's bigger than stallions, or so rumor slings it," the cloaked figure rapped back, voice starting gravelly and then swinging tenor-high at the sentence's end.

The tall man chuckled with meaty relish. "What fills the rod's same as fills the pen, as you'd know better."

So this was the man who within a few years would say that his companion, the half-seen figure standing just outside the blade of light cast by the inner inn, was "not of an age but for all time." Ben Jonson, in breeches, a tuft of white shirt sticking from an unbuttoned fly. A boisterous night for all.

"Aye, even for the miowing of kitticat poetry on spunk-stained parchment, truest?" the cloaked man said, words quick but tone wan and fading.

"Better than a mewling or a yawper," the short man said. All three moved a bit unsteadily around a hitching post and across the yard. Jonson muttered, laughed. She

caught the earthy reek of ale. The man who must be Drayton—though he looked little like the one engraving of his profile she had seen—snickered liquidly, and the breeze snatched away a quick comment from the man who—she was sure now—must be Shakespeare. She amped up the infrared and pressed a small button at the bridge of the binoculars. A buzz told her digital image recording was on, all three face-forward in the shimmering silver moonlight, a fine shot. Only then did she realize they were walking straight at her.

Could they make her out, here in a thicket? Her throat tightened and she missed their next words, though the recorder at her hip would suck it all in. They advanced, staring straight into her eyes—across the short and weedy lawn, right up to the very bushes that hid her. Shakespeare grunted, coughed, and fished at his drawers. To her relief, they all three produced themselves, sighed with pleasure, and spewed rank piss into the bushes.

"The one joy untaxed by King or wife," Jonson meditated.

The others nodded, each man embedded in his own moment of release, each tilting his head back to gaze at the sharp stars. Done, they tucked back in. They turned and walked off to Vitrovna's left, onto the lane.

She followed as silently as she could, keeping to the woods. Thorns snagged her cloak, and soon they had walked out of earshot of even her directional microphone. She was losing invaluable data!

She stumbled onto the path, ran to catch up, and then followed, aided by shadows. To walk and keep the acoustics trained on the three weaving figures was all she could manage, especially in the awkward, raw-leather shoes she had to wear. She remembered being shocked that this age did not even know to make shoes differently curved for left and right feet, and felt the effect of so simple a difference within half a kilometer. A blister irked her left heel before she saw a glow ahead. She had given up trying to follow their darting talk. Most was ordinary byplay laced with coarse humor, scarcely memorable, but scholars could determine that later.

They stopped outside a rambling house with a three-windowed front from which spilled warm lantern light. As the night deepened, a touch of winter returned. An ice-tinged wind whipped in a swaying oak and whistled at the house's steep-gabled peak. Vitrovna drew as near as she dared, behind a churning elm.

"Country matters need yawning mouths," Shakespeare said, evidently referring to earlier talk.

"Would that I knew keenly what they learn from scrape and toil," Drayton said, voice lurching as the wind tried to rip it away from her pickups.

"A Johannes Factotum of your skinny skin?" Shakespeare said, sniffing.

Vitrovna translated to herself, *A Jack-Do-All of the senses?*—though the whole conversation would have to be endlessly filtered and atomized by computer intelligences before she could say anything definitive. If she got away with this, that is.

"Upstart crow, cockatrice!" Jonson exclaimed, clapping Shakespeare on the shoulder. All three laughed warmly.

A whinny sped upon the breeze. From around the house a boy led two horses. "Cloddy chariot awaits," Drayton said blearily.

Shakespeare gestured toward his own front door, which at that moment creaked open, sending fresh light into the hummocky yard where they stood. "Would you not—"

"My arse needs an hour of saddle, or sure will be hard-sore on the ride to London tomorrow," Jonson said. Drayton nodded. "I go belike, to see to writ's business."

"My best bed be yours, if!"

"No, no, friend." Jonson swung up onto a roan horse with surprising agility for one so large. "You look chilled. Get inside to your good wife."

Ben waved goodnight, calling to the woman who had appeared in the doorway. She was broad and sturdy, graying beneath a frilly white cap, and stood with arms crossed, her stance full of judgment. "Farewell, Anne!"

Goodbyes sounding through the frosty air, the two men clapped away. Vitrovna watched Shakespeare wave to them, cloak billowing, then turn to his wife. This was the Anne Hathaway whom his will left with his "second-best" bed, who had saddled him with children since his marriage at eighteen—and who may have forced him into the more profitable enterprise of playwriting to keep their household in something resembling the style of a country gentleman. Vitrovna got Anne's image as she croaked irritably at Shakespeare to come inside.

Vitrovna prayed that she would get the fragment of time she needed. Just a moment, to make a fleeting, last contact—

He hesitated, then waved his wife away and walked toward the woods. She barked something at him and slammed the door.

Vitrovna slipped from behind the elm and followed him. He coughed, stopped, and began to pee again into a bush.

An ailment? To have to go again so soon? Stratford's vicar had written that on this night Will "drank too hard," took ill, and later died of a fever. This evidence suggested, though, that he knew something was awry when he wrote his will in March, a few weeks before this evening. Or maybe he had felt an ominous pressure from his approaching fifty-second birthday, two days away—when the fever would claim him.

All this flitted through her mind as she approached the wavering figure in the woodsmoke-flavored, whipping wind. He tucked himself back in, turned—and saw her.

Here the danger made her heart pound. If she did something to tweak the timeline a bit too much . . .

"Ah! Pardons, Madam—the ale within would without."

"Sir, I've come to tell you of greatness exceeding anything you can dream." She had rehearsed this, striving for an accent that would not put him off, but now that she had heard his twangy Elizabethan lilt, she knew that was hopeless. She plowed ahead. "I wanted you to know that your name will be sung down the ages as the greatest of writers."

Will's tired, grizzled face wrinkled. "Who might you be?"

—and the solidity of the past struck her true, her breath sour with pickled herrings and Rhenish wine. The reeking intensity of the man nearly staggered her. Her isolated, word-clogged life had not prepared her for this vigorous, full-bodied age. She gulped and forced out her set speech.

"You may feel neglected now, but centuries hence you'll be read and performed endlessly—"

"What are you?" A sour scowl.

"I am from the future. I've come backward in time to tell you, so that such a wonderful man need not, well, need not think he was just a minor poet. Your plays, they're the thing. They—"

"You copy my lines? 'The play's the thing.' Think you that japing pranks—"

"No, no! I truly am from the future, many centuries away."

"And spring upon me in drafty night? I—"

Desperately she brought up her flashlight. "Look." It clicked on, a cutting blue-white beam that made the ground and leaves leap from inky presences into hard realities. "See? This is a kind of light you don't have. I can show you—"

He leaped back, eyes white, mouth sagging. "Uh!"

"Don't be afraid. I wondered if you could tell me something about the dark lady in your sonnets, just a moment—"

"Magic!"

"No, really, it's just a different kind of lantern. And your plays, did you have any help writing them?"

He recovered, mouth curving shrewdly. "You be scholar or rumor-monger?"

"Neither, sir."

His face hardened as he raised his palm to shield his eyes from the brilliance. "Think me gut-gullible?"

"You deserve to know that we in the future will appreciate you, love you, revere you. It's only justice that you know your works will live forever, be honored—"

"Promising me life forever, then? That's your cheese?"

"No, you don't—"

"This future you claim—know something of my self, then? My appointed final hour?" His eyes were angry slits, his mouth a flat, bloodless line.

Was he so quick to guess the truth? That she had come at the one possible moment to speak to him, when his work or friends would not be perturbed? "I've come because, yes, this is my only chance to speak with you. There's nothing I can do about that, but I thought—"

"You tempt me with wisps, foul visions."

Did he suspect that once he walked into that house, lay upon his second-best bed, he would never arise again? With leaden certainty she saw him begin to gather this, his mouth working, chin bobbing uncertainly.

"Sir, no, please, I'm just here to, to—"

"Flat-voiced demon, leave me!"

"No, I—"

He reached into his loose-fitting shirt and drew out a small iron cross. Holding it up, he said, "Blest be he who spares my stones, curst be he who moves my bones!"

The lines chiseled above his grave. So he had them

in mind already, called them up like an incantation. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Go! Christ immaculate, drive such phantoms from me! Give me a sword of spirit, Lord!"

Vitrovna backed away. "I, I—"

—and then she was running, panicked and mortified, into the woods. In her ears rang a fragment from *The Tempest*.

*What seest thou else*

*In the dark backward and abysm of time?*

In the shimmering cylinder she panted with anxiety and mortification, her skin a sheen of cold sweat. She had failed terribly, despite decades of research. All her trial runs with ordinary folk of these times who were about to meet their end, carried out in similar circumstances—those had gone well. The subjects had welcomed her. Death was natural and common here, an easeful event. They had accepted her salute with stoic calm, a quality she had come to envy in these dim eras. Certainly they had not turned their angers on her.

But she had faltered before Shakespeare. He had been larger than life, awesome.

Her recordings were valuable, yes, but she might never be able to release them for scholarly purposes now. She had wrenched the past terribly, exciting the poor man just before death's black hand claimed him. She could never forget the look of wild surmise and gathering panic that worked across that wise face. And now—

She had stolen into the University Corps Facility, slipped into the machine with the aid of friends, all in the service of true, deep history. But if she had changed the past enough to send a ripple of causation forward, into her own era, then the Corps would find her, exact the penalty.

No time to think of that. She felt the sickening wrench, a shudder, and then she thumped down into a stony field.

Still night air, a sky of cutting stars. A liquid murmuring led her to the bank of the Big Wood River and she worked her way along it, looking for the house lights. This route she knew well, had paced it off in her own era. She could tell from the set of the stars that she had time, no need to rush this.

Minutes here took literally no time at all in the stilled future world where machines as large as the cities of this age worked to suspend her here. The essence of stealing time from the Corps was that you took infinitesimal time-wedges of that future world, undetectable, elusive—if she was lucky. The Corps would find her uses self-indulgent, sentimental, arrogant. To meddle so could snuff out their future, or merely Vitrovna herself—and all so a few writers could know for a passing moment of their eventual high destiny? Absurd, of course.

July's dawn heat made her shed her cloak and she paused to get her breath. The river wrinkled and pulsed and swelled smooth against the resistance of a big log, and she looked down through it to an unreadable depth. Trout hung in the glassy fast water like ornaments, hold-



ing into the current. Deeper still a fog of sand ran above the gravel, stirred by currents around the pale, round rocks.

The brimming majesty of this silent moment caught at her heart. Such simple beauty had no protection here, needed none.

After a long moment she made herself go on and found the house as faint streamers traced the dawn. Blocky, gray poured concrete, hunkered down like a bunker. A curious, closed place for a man who had yearned to be of the land and sky. In 1926 he had said, "The real reason for not committing suicide is because you always know how swell life gets again after the hell is over." Yet in this spare, beautiful place of rushing water and jutting stone he would finally yield to the abyss that had tempted him all his wracked life.

She worked her way up the stony slope, her Elizabethan shoes making the climb hard. As she reached the small outer door into the basement she fished forth the flex-key. Its yellow metal shaped itself to whatever configuration the lock needed, and in a moment she was inside the storage room, beside the heavy mahogany rack. She had not seen such things except for photographs. Elegant machines of blue sheen and polished, painful shapes. Death solidified and lustrous. They enchanted her as she waited.

A rustling upstairs. Steps going into the kitchen, where she knew he would pick up the keys on the ledge above the sink. He came down the stairs, haggard in the slack pajamas and robe, the handsome face from photographs now lined and worn, wreathed by a white beard and tangled hair. He padded toward the rack, eyes distant, and then stopped, blinking, as he saw her.

"What the hell?" A rough voice, but recognizable.

Mr. Hemingway, I ask only a moment of your time, here at the end. I—

"You're from the IRS, aren't you? Snooping into my—"

Alarm spiked in her throat. "No, sir, I am from the future. I've come backward in time to tell you, so that so wonderful a man need not—"

"FBI?" The jowly face clouded, eyes narrow and bright. "I know you've been following me, bribing my friends."

The drinking, hypertension, hepatitis and creeping manic depression had driven him further even than her research suggested.

She spread her hands. "No, no. You deserve to know that we in the future will appreciate you, love you, revere you. It's only justice that you know your works will live forever, be honored—"

"You're a goddamn federal agent and a liar on top of that." His yellowed teeth set at an angry angle. "Get out!"

"Remember when you said that you wanted to get into the ring with Mr. Tolstoy? Well, you have, you did. You're in his class. Centuries from now—"

A cornered look came into the jumping eyes. "Sure, I've got six books I declare to win with. I stand on that."

"You have! I come from—"

"You a critic? Got no use for sneaky bastards come right into your house, beady-eyed nobodies, ask you how you write like it was how you shit—"

He leaned abruptly against the pinewood wall and she caught a sour scent of defeat from him. Color drained from his wracked face and his head wobbled. "Future, huh?" He nodded as if somehow accepting this. "God, I don't know . . ."

She stepped back, fear tight in her throat. Earlier in this year he had written *A long life deprives a man of his optimism. Better to die in all the happy period of unillusioned youth, to go out in a blaze of light, than to have your body worn out and old and illusions shattered*. She saw it now in the loose cant of mouth and jaw, the flickering anxiety and hollow dread. The power of it was unbearable.

I . . . I wanted you to know that those novels, the short stories, they will—"

The sagging head stopped swaying. It jerked up.

"Which have you read?"

"All of them. I'm a literary historian."

"Damn, I'm just read by history professors?" Disdain soured the words.

There were no such professions in her time, just the departments of the Corps, but she could not make this ravaged man understand that. "No, your dramas are enjoyed by millions, by billions—"

"Dramas?" He lurched against the wall. "I wrote no dramas."

How to tell him that the media of her time were not the simple staged amusements of this era? That they were experienced directly through the nervous system, sensory banquets of immense emotional power, lived events that diminished the linear medium of words alone to a curious relic?

"You mean those bum movies made from the novels? Tracy in *The Old Man*?"

"No, I mean—we have different ways of reading the same work, that is all. But for so long I've felt the despair of artists who did not know how much they would mean, poor Shakespeare going to his grave never suspecting—"

"So you know what I'm down here for?" A canny glint in the eyes.

"Yes, of course. That's why I came."

He pulled himself erect with visible effort. "If you're not just another shit artist some here to get a rise out of me—"

"I'm not. I'm a scholar who feels so much for you lonely Primitivists who—"

"That's what you call us? Real writers? *Primitives*?" Jutting jaw. "I'm going to kick your goddamn ass out of here!"

His sudden clotted rage drove her back like a blow.

"I meant—"

"Go!" He shoved her. "Hell will freeze over before I'll give in to a lard-ass—"

She bolted away, out the basement door, into the spreading dawn glow. Down the rocky slope, panic gurgling acid in her mouth. She knew that years before this, when asked his opinion of death, he had answered, "Just another whore." But there was something new and alive in his face just now, fresh fuel from his sudden,

hugely powerful anger, some sea change that sent into her mind a wrenching possibility.

She looked back at the house. He was standing there thin and erect, shaking a knotted fist down at her. She reached the dawn-etched river and punched the summons into her controls and then came the wringing snap and she was in the cylinder again.

Vitrovna let a ragged sigh escape into the cool, calming air. This one was as unsettling as the last. The old man had seemed animated as she left, focused outside himself by her visit. He had kept her off balance the entire time.

Now she saw her error. The earlier tests with ordinary people, whose deaths did not matter in the flow of history, had misled her. In person Shakespeare and Hemingway loomed immensely larger than anyone else she had ever known. Compared with the wan, reasonable people of her time, they were bristly giants. Their reactions could not be predicted and they unsettled even her, an historian who thought she knew what to expect.

Vitrovna leaned back, shaken and exhausted. She had programmed a long rest after this engagement, time to get her thoughts in order before the next. That one, the great poet Diana Azar, lay as far ahead in centuries as the gap between the last two, yet her simple dress should still pass there, and—

A slim man materialized at the snub end of the cylinder. He wore a curious blue envelope which revealed only head and hands, his skin a smooth green.

"Ah," he said in a heavily accented tenor, "I have intersected you in time."

She gasped. "You—how? To catch me while transporting—"

"In your age, impossible, of course." He arched his oyster-colored forehead, which had no eyebrows. "But when you are in Transition we of your far future may snag you."

She had thought for decades about what she would do if caught, and now said cannily, "You follow the Code standards for self-incrimination?"

She blinked with shock when he laughed. "Code? Ancient history—though it's all the same here, of course. I am not one of your Corps police."

"Then you're not going to prosecute . . ."

"That was an illusion of your time, Vitrovna. You don't mind me using your first name? In our era, we have only one name, though many prefer none."

"But how can you . . ."

He languidly folded his arms, which articulated as if his elbows were double-jointed. "I must first say that generations far beyond yours are eternally grateful to you for opening this possibility and giving us these historical records." He gestured at her senso-binoculars.

"Records? They survived? I mean, I do make it back to my—"

"Not precisely. But the detailed space-time calculations necessary to explain, these you would not understand.

You braved the Codes and the Corps quite foolishly, as you have just discovered—but that is of no import to us."

She felt a rush of hope, her lips opening in expectation. "Then you've come to rescue me from them?"

He frowned, a gesture which included his ears. "No, no. You feared the Corps' authority, but that was mere human power. They vaguely understood the laws of acausality, quite rightly feared them, and so instituted their Code. But they were like children playing with shells at the seashore, never glimpsing the beasts which swam in the deeps beyond."

Her seat jolted and she felt queasy. He nodded, as if expecting this, and touched his left wrist, which was transparent.

"The Code was a crude rule of thumb, but your violations of it transgressed far beyond mere human edicts. How arrogant, your age! To think that your laws could rule a continuum. Space-time itself has a flex and force. Your talk with Hemingway—quite valuable historically, by the way, considering that he was not going to ever release his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, when he went down into that basement. But even more important was what he wrote next."

"Next? But he—"

"Quite. Even so, rather less spectacular than your 'apparition' before Shakespeare. As his shaky hand testified, you caused him to gather his notes and scraps of plays. They kept quite well in even a tin box, wedged in with the corpse. A bounty for the critics, though it upset many cherished theories."

"But he still died of pneumonia?"

"You do not have miraculous healing powers. You simply scared him into leaving something more of a record."

"Still, with so much attention paid to the few records we do have, or *did* have, I—"

"Quite." A judicious nod. "I'm afraid that despite our vastly deeper understanding of these matters, there is nothing we can do about that. Causality will have its way."

The cylinder lurched. A raw bass note. "Then how . . ."

"Not much time left, I'm afraid. Sorry." He leaned forward eagerly. "But I did want to visit you, to thank you for, well, liberating this method of probing the past, at great personal sacrifice. You deserve to know that our epoch will revere you."

He spoke rapidly, admiration beaming in his odd face, the words piling up in an awful leaden weight that sent bile-dark fear rushing hotly through her, a massive premonition.

"So, Vitrovna, I saw the possibility of making this intersection. It's only right that you know just how famous you will be . . ."

The sensation of stepping off a step into a dark, unending fall.

Her speech. He was giving her own speech, and for the same reason. ♦

# Last One Close the Door

Richard Chwedyk

"Where is Thompson?" asked the tall, bald, square-jawed agent.

Since he didn't specify which Thompson he meant, I answered, "He's here. And he's not here."

A perceptive interrogator would have taken this remark more seriously. The four men in Thompson's office simply grew impatient.

"Miss Travis, we've been all through this theater," said the other agent, a fellow with short, dark hair, no more than bristle, and a nail-thin face that hardly came to a chin at all; rather, it disappeared into his neck with only something like a dimple to mark the border. "Should we dig up the floor and see if he's buried there?"

Men in dark suits rarely appreciate laughter. Beside the remark's not being funny, I was restrained by the thought that the gate would open in half an hour.

There were five of us crammed into the tiny office under the stairs: the agents, who never told me their names (if they did I've forgotten them) or precisely which government office they worked for (DOD? DOE? Do Re Mi? DUM? They acted as if they represented *all* of them); Russell and Quentin,

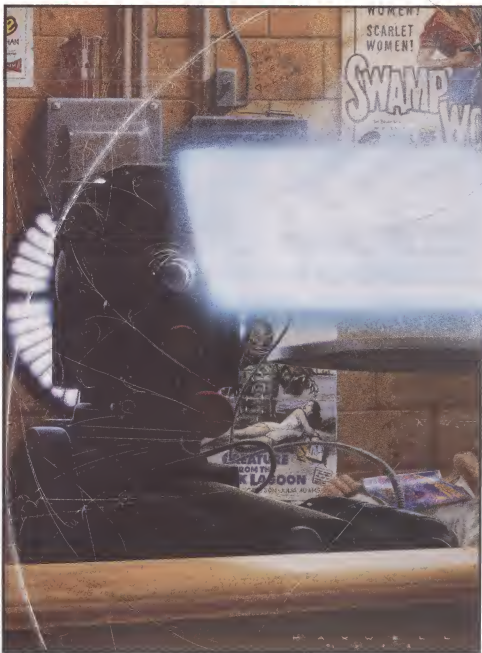


Illustration by Mark Maxwell

the physicists, sitting like two boys who'd been called down to the principal's office; I sat in a folding chair, in my school uniform, legs crossed, hands folded on my knee, and facing these interrogators gathered around Mr. Thompson's desk.

This was Mr. Thompson's private sanctuary, the heart of the Alma Theater, and I wondered what he would have made of this scene. I imagined his tall frame crumpled comfortably behind his desk, leaning back in his rickety, squeaking chair. Every wall of Mr. Thompson's office was covered with posters and lobby cards. He made no discriminations between old and new, epic and modest, tasteless and sublime. All posters are invitations, he once told me. To the right of *Swamp Women* and *She Gods of Shark Reef* was *Citizen Kane*; above that was *The Searchers* and below it *Things to Come*. *The Rules of the Game* balanced *The Evil of Frankenstein* and between them were the scantily attired *Young Graduates*. Whenever I interrupted him with some theater business, he would stare at me from out of his abstractions and ask, "So, Margaret, are you still grieving over goldengrove unleaving?" And I would reply, "That is all ye know on earth, *mon vieux*, and all ye need to know."

"Why are you looking at your watch?" The agent (who was rather handsome beneath his baldness, with his fair, neatly trimmed moustache) put all the menace he could muster into his voice.

"The show lets out in ten minutes. Someone will have to lock up."

A scream, from the film showing in the auditorium, filtered in through the office walls, followed by what seemed an unnaturally loud thump.

Yes, I thought, I'd miss this place, a little. Mostly, I would miss the walks with Mr. Thompson. Every night, after we closed up the theater and exited through the fire door (the one with Mr. Thompson's neatly printed sign, "Make sure this door shuts tightly behind you when you leave. Thank you."), we walked down Main Street on our way to the diner, past all the empty stores. Sometimes we spoke about poetry, particles and probability. Sometimes we spoke of his legendary grandmother, who almost made it as a movie actress. Sometimes we didn't speak at all; we simply inhaled the sadness that hung in the air of Burden Park the way grimy soot once had before the steel plant shut down. And at the end of the walk, Mother would be waiting behind the counter, pouring us coffee and asking her perpetual question: "So when are you going to take me away from all this?"

"We'll be closing the theater tonight," the bald agent said, giving the notebook he confiscated from me a gentle slap.

I would have asked the agents if they had looked for Mr. Thompson at the diner, but I was sure these cunning gentlemen had stationed someone over there already.

The ugly thought that I could become stranded here started to sink in. Without a plan, I simply had to wait for an exploitable opportunity.

Once upon a time, I told myself, there was a gifted physicist who gave up his job at a huge government ac-

celerator laboratory. Brilliant though he was, he had the misfortune to live in that brief age of brilliant physicists. Like many of his colleagues, he indulged in metaphors, but his metaphors were never quite the ones in fashion. He had too much of the poet in him, that impulse to be a synthesist as well as a biographer of the particular. Coleridge's notion that a poet should look for the similarities in the dissimilar and the dissimilarities in the similar. He and his research—especially the personal work he conducted in the lab's graveyard hours—were lost in the crowd. With a small inheritance, he bought a little theater in the exhausted, run-down industrial suburb of Burden Park.

The Alma was no palace, not even in its heyday. The terra cotta face was modest when compared to the Byzantine and Aragonese fervors of the big-city theaters; no fountains; no stained glass; the balcony was hardly large enough to deserve the name. But in the thirties the Alma had just enough panache to soothe the wounded psyches of the Great Depression. Today, with the rest of downtown Burden Park turning into so many empty storefronts, and all the big-city movie palaces knocked down, the Alma deserved, if not an award, at least a little respect.

Almost instinctively, the physicist knew all this. And he knew something more: the best place to hide a great truth is in a metaphor, where no one will recognize it. The theater is a constant. Its essential design is replicated thousands of times—seats, walls, screen, projection room—but the process follows for all of them. It doesn't matter if a theater's run-down or tiny, as long as it's a theater. Marble birdbaths and Deco mosaics belong to *this* world. The screen is a window into *another*.

He worked and he waited, for he knew that as the fashions of thought changed, some brilliant colleague would take a second look at his notes and see in them something more than a few theoretical eccentricities.

I looked at the two physicists. Russell, dark-haired, with a thick, untrimmed moustache, seemed pleasantly distracted by the *Young Graduates* poster. However, Quentin—with taffy-colored hair and pale, putty skin—wrested my notebook from the bald agent, who was more interested in the contents of my purse.

It *had* been a slow evening before they showed up. Our final showing of *Slaughterer's House* attracted about eight customers. It had shown at the mall the month before, and now only the latecomers and true believers were interested. Mrs. Kennelly sat in the box office, reading a Barbara Pym novel. She was a woman who had never lived in Technicolor, her features stark against her frosted complexion and her bob arranged in flat black brushstrokes across her head. Roy, our ostensible usher, leaned against a wall, working with a wooden coffee stirrer to extract a wad of gum from his expensive running shoe. His head was the same shape as a cinder block, and beyond its advantage of having hair and a sort of physiognomy, there was little difference between the two. He had just finished relating to me the high points of our current attraction: the trash compactor, the strangulation with a sausage and what he thought a novel turn at the end where the killer walks triumphant-

ly into the sunrise. He was honestly surprised at my lack of interest.

"I thought you liked movies," he said.

I had cleaned out the popcorn machine and rearranged the candy in the counter: lemon drops to the right, cherry to the left, peanut butter cups on the top shelf and Raisinets on the bottom. With all that done, I went back to my notes on probability conservation, kept in a deliberately innocuous pink notebook.

The two men standing outside couldn't help looking conspicuous, pretending to stare at the poster under the marquee. The only other businesses open in downtown Burden Park were Paradise Video next door (which we'd renamed Parasite Video) and the Rexall. Mr. Thompson had told me that the physicists would be in sports jackets. The ones I had to worry about would be in suits.

They bought tickets and entered. Mrs. Kennelly was her usual uncommunicative self when they spoke to her. Roy shrugged at their queries and returned to his sabotaged shoe. I closed my notebook as they approached the candy counter.

"We're looking for your boss," said Quentin.

"Do you know where we can find him?" Russell asked. They both wore the same kind of eyeglass frames. I wondered if they shared the same prescription, too.

"Here, if you can wait."

They glanced around nervously. A grinding noise from the auditorium invaded the lobby: the trash compactor, followed by a chorus of squealing screams.

"I don't think we have much time," Russell said. I could hardly hear him over the noise.

"Roy," I called out, "would you please close that door?"

Roy, standing in the doorway, pointed into the dark theater, smiling.

"Watch it *inside*," I made a sweeping gesture with one hand and Roy disappeared behind the closing door.

"Is there somewhere in here where we can wait?" Quentin said in a gentle, almost patronizing voice.

"You could go in and watch the rest of our feature. I've been told it has a powerful ending." As I spoke, Mrs. Kennelly was selling tickets to two men in charcoal-colored suits.

"No, no," Quentin twisted his upturned hand as if he were correcting my French. "You don't understand. We're his friends. We used to work with him before he came here."

"I do understand. Mr. Thompson's been expecting you. But he never referred to you as 'friends.'"

"Really?" Quentin took a step back and looked me over as if my knee socks disqualified me from any knowledge not related to the sale of Ju-jubes. "How *did* he refer to us?"

"I think the phrase he used was 'strays from the herd.'"

"Come on," Russell said, unable to disguise a certain bright urgency in his eyes as he peeked through the door where Roy had been standing. "Let's just watch the film until he shows up."

Quentin sneered at me, but the two men in dark suits left him no time to reply to his colleague. I smiled in spite of my imminent peril.

The agents performed with grim efficiency, waving their IDs (so swiftly that no one could read them) and searching the physicists.

The chinless one kept an eye on us while the bald one discovered that Roy and Mrs. Kennelly were good for one-liners (Mrs. K.: "Drug agents? I always figured he was *on* them, but I didn't think he'd sell them." Roy: "I don't know shit, Mister.") but little else.

"Try this one," Quentin called to the agent as he pointed his thumb at me. "She thinks she knows quite a bit."

The bald agent scrutinized me. "You know where he is."

Since he wasn't asking, I didn't reply.

"What's this?" He pointed to my notebook. In the commotion, I hadn't found a discreet way to slip it under the counter. His cold blue eyes almost crossed when he flipped it open and saw the equations.

"Calculus," I explained.

He looked me over, from loafers to white blouse.

"That's not calculus." Quentin peered over the agent's shoulder. "Not any *she* could do."

The bald agent looked at me as if mathematical expressions were a telltale sign of my degeneracy. "Where is he?"

"At this moment, it would be hard to say."

For the space of an inhalation, his face bulged in exasperation. But he was a professional, whatever else he was, and instantly regained his composure.

The agents searched the theater, with the physicists and me in tow. I made it more of a tour, showing them places, like the supply rooms behind the screen, where I said they wouldn't find anything and where they carefully looked anyway. As we walked down the aisle of the theater proper, the agents checked every face in the audience, which obviously didn't take them very long. Russell stumbled as he tried to catch a glimpse of the famous sausage scene. The bathrooms, the balconies—no stone or fossilized cherry drop went unturned, and though the journey may have added a little something to our historical and cultural perspectives, there was no sign of Mr. Thompson.

Upstairs, the projectionist lay asleep on his cot. The agents, understandably curious, turned him over to see if he matched Mr. Thompson's description. They couldn't awaken him, however, which didn't surprise me. In my time at the Alma, I had never seen him awake, or off the cot for that matter. He certainly looked nothing like Mr. Thompson.

The bald agent soured with this disappointment. "What's that?" He made a gesture of accusation toward a metal box with several cables from the projectors jacked into it.

"A timer box. Mr. Thompson built it to run the machines."

"Then what's *he* here for?" The chinless agent pointed to the man on the cot.

"The union requires that we employ a projectionist. It doesn't require that he work."

"What's this?" the bald agent surveyed the small sixteen-millimeter projector threaded up and ready to roll.

"Mr. Thompson runs a lot of movies after hours. The one on there now is a collection of clips of his grandmother's movie appearances."

"Why doesn't he just use a VCR?" the chinless one asked.

It was my turn to look disappointed. "A man who lives on the *Queen Mary* isn't impressed by a tugboat ride."

The bald agent pressed us on. We pulled Russell away from the projector window and went up to the roof. It was apparent that unless someone could make himself look like a sheet of tar paper, it was impossible to hide up there.

Once more I was subjected to the cool scrutiny of the bald agent, who was perhaps considering where on my person I may have hidden Mr. Thompson.

"Let's talk," he said.

We went down to Thompson's office, where I now sat with a placid smile and wondered how in hell I could undo this mess before the gate opened.

I watched the bald agent poke through my purse. "Don't you need a warrant to do that?"

"Do you object?"

"I don't know. Am I under arrest?"

"Margaret Travis," he read the name off my school ID. "Seventeen . . . a student at St. Julian's . . . live with your mother at 1338 Stafford . . . employed by the Alma Theater."

"I hope I haven't strained your deductive powers."

He flashed me a look meant to curdle my supper, then dug out my Explorers pin from the bottom of my purse. Holding it up to the glare of the overhead light, he read the inscription.

"Hyperballistic Explorers League?"

"A club," I explained.

Russell was temporarily diverted from his investigation of the *Young Graduates*. "Sounds like Mensa with an agenda."

"Only hyperbole." I held out my hand to the agent. He hesitated, then placed the pin in my palm.

The last thing he took out was a pair of glasses—cardboard frames, really, holding a couple of pieces of polarized film—the kind used for watching 3-D movies. A little *icbb* he made with tongue against palate was his only comment before he dropped them back in my purse.

"Miss Travis, you're not under arrest, but you may be in big trouble if you try to hide anything from us to protect your boss. All the work he did at the accelerator is considered government property."

"All he took were his ideas," I said as I stuck the pin on my blouse for safekeeping. "Ideas aren't property."

"They are if they were developed with government money on government property." The bald agent looked around the office, not hiding his disdain for the place. "If he's continuing his research for some company or some other government, he's in big trouble."

"The only government he cares about is that of his conscience."

"Oh. Then it's his conscience that made him change his name from Owen to Thompson and hide out in this

shabby little theater." Quentin beamed proudly, apparently pleased with his rhetorical flourish. He pointed out something in my notebook to Russell and passed it over to him.

"You have no idea, do you?" I should have done a better job of hiding my disappointment, but where I came from physicists were made of sharper stuff. "You really can't see the object and what it represents?"

Quentin shook his head. Russell looked up from the notebook, twisting at an end of his moustache. "Object?"

"The *theater*. Don't you see?"

What I saw was the answer shoot through their heads like water through a sieve.

"What do you expect to do with Thompson's work?" I asked.

"Do?" Quentin shrugged. "We'll study it. See what we can learn from it."

"You know what you can do with it, or you wouldn't have tracked Thompson down here. And *they* know what you can do with it—I turned to the agents—or they wouldn't have tracked *you* down."

Russell and Quentin both searched for posters to which they could affix their attention, staring in every direction but toward the agents. In this world, it's not considered good form to point at one's shackles.

"And what do *you* know about his work?" the bald agent intoned: fittingly, like a bell, a metal shell vibrating through its hollow center.

"What can she know?" Quentin shot at him. "A kid."

"And a girl at that, let's not forget," I added.

"Let her answer," the agent commanded. His eyes darted back to me.

"What do I know? Not much. Certainly not as much as these fine representatives of good solid science, empiricism and literalism."

"How's that?" Russell pried his eyes from a *Young Graduate* in hot pants and a painted-on halter top. He looked me over as if he might be making a comparison.

"There is poetry in equations and equations in poetry. If you don't see the dualities—multiplicities, even—in one world, you won't really understand the dualities in many worlds."

I crossed my legs and smoothed the cuffs of my socks. Russell blushed and shifted his attention to the *Truck Stop Women*.

Out in the theater, a final scream ended in a gurgle, followed by another gratuitous thump, and an electronic keyboard instrument played what can only be described as an upbeat funeral march. The film was over. I could hear the stalwarts shuffling out. Soon, Roy would be grunting his usual inarticulate good-night to Mrs. Kennelly. Mrs. Kennelly would record the receipts and lock up the ledger in the drawer under the cash register. It was rumored that even the projectionist sometimes stirred himself and went home to bed. They would all leave through the back fire exit. I couldn't help glancing at my watch again.

"Expecting someone?" asked the bald agent.

There were worse places to be stranded, I thought. For example, once upon a time, Mr. Thompson and I



took a walk in another Burden Park, with a Main Street aglow in the neon of raunchy nightclubs, adult bookstores, peepshows and even shadier places lurking behind them. There was a red glow coming from the steel mill; every building in town wore a coat of its soot. As we walked we saw drunks colliding with each other; bikers looked for fights; hookers, tired of standing, crouched on curbs under the streetlights that still worked; there was a fire going in a garbage can in the vacant lot at Greenleaf and Anderson, with a circle of ragged men gathered around it, cackling like witches at their cauldron.

"In some cases, then," Thompson muttered, "my grandmother really did make it in the movies."

"Nothing big. A chorister in a Marx Brothers picture. A few things like that," I told him. "New travelers always think the changes will be dramatic. In one place you're Owen. In another you're Thompson. There's no way to measure the magnitude of change. The smallest changes are often the biggest."

We found the diner filled with several species of the damned, emaciated victims and victimizers all nursing their cups of coffee. And when my mother said, "So when are you going to take me away from all this?" she spoke as if only to herself. After all, it hadn't been long since her only daughter died in a not-so-pretty way, and she was still getting used to seeing her ghost show up just as the graveyard shift went on.

Outside, I heard the laconic thump of Roy's footsteps past the office door, the squeal of the fire door followed by the clack of its shutting.

"About this notebook," Quentin held it up. "Thompson made you copy these equations out, didn't he? So they'd be in your hand, and he could hide them with you, right?"

"Those are my equations."

"Sure." He rolled out the word like a long carpet. "So you're a genius, then?"

"You didn't think *Thompson* was a genius when he worked with you." I heard the high, steady clip-clip of Mrs. Kennelly's footsteps hesitate outside the office door, then continue to the fire exit. "You thought him out of step, even a bit dense. A genius, in the original sense, is more a spirit than a person." The door squealed . . . and that was all I heard. Thank you, Mrs. Kennelly. "A muse. A genie. An angel. You wouldn't mistake me for *that*, would you?"

Quentin's mouth became flat and lipless. No, he wouldn't. "You're not capable of producing these equations."

I reached out for the notebook. "May I show you?"

Quentin reluctantly gave it up. I opened it to the first two pages, where the expressions were rather colorful and dramatic, done in several colors of marker.

"You recognize this. Thompson's model of a sequence of universes, called probabilities for our purposes. In some ways it's an extension of string theory and it raises the ante on current field theories by presuming those theories comprise a mere two-dimensional slice cut from a sphere. He began it as a way to explain the anomalous behavior of certain particles that seemed to follow a non-

random sequence." I turned a page. "Impossible, right? How can quantum behavior be nonrandom unless something else is acting upon the quanta, the way you do at the accelerator? Eventually, he arrived at the insanely presumptuous conclusion that something was batting these particles into your slice of the sphere from another slice of the sphere, perhaps just to see if something here would notice the anomaly."

I turned another page. "So, he noticed it. The next step for any self-respecting physicist would be to show whatever batted these particles into your probability that you *did* notice. How do you do that? Perhaps by batting some of your more stable particles into its probability. It took several years on the graveyard shift for him to come up with *this*." I turned another page and held it out for them.

"Nonsense!" Quentin made a gesture as if he were pushing away a plate of Brussels sprouts. "Absurd! First of all, the configuration may be okay, but you've got the quark masses all mixed up."

"Blah!" I shook the notebook at him. "You have to make the same leap Thompson did, or you're never going to see it. He worked for *months* on the quark relationships."

Russell shook his colleague by the elbow. "It's mathematically plausible, but experimentally impossible."

"If you really believe all of this is a mathematical anomaly, why bother coming here?" I looked at the agents. "Why bother to claim government property when the property is worthless?"

The agents turned to the physicists. The physicists looked at the agents. I recrossed my legs, watching the quartet of doubt take shape.

Quentin, pensive, rubbed a finger against his upper lip. "And the next page? How do you interpret that?"

I took a deep breath and turned to the next page. "See? This is the grand model, into which all the probabilities fit. Look at it carefully. What does it look like? What does it remind you of?"

Quentin and Russell stared, hummed, and shrugged. The agents looked on, flat-faced, barely able to disguise their boredom.

I put the notebook down on Mr. Thompson's desk and clapped my hands upon my knees. "I'll show you. The theater should be empty by now." I stood up and pointed to the door. "Shall we? Or do you think I'll make a break for it?"

"You wouldn't get very far," the bald agent assured me. No way would *he* be outsmarted by a schoolgirl in her little plaid skirt.

Eight minutes to go.

I took the notebook and asked the bald agent, "Are you finished with my purse now?"

He picked up the purse, taking one last look inside before pressing the clasp and handing it back.

"Remember, you won't get far."

I smiled, all teeth, as if he were complimenting me. I could feel his gaze stay on me as I walked to the candy counter to get my blazer, then dig into the cabinet under the popcorn machine until I pulled out a box. I took out

a handful of cardboard 3-D glasses and offered them to the four men.

"Here, you might need these."

The agents regarded me suspiciously. Quentin was good for a derisive snort. Russell reached out and took one.

"I haven't seen a pair of these in years."

"Take more. One might not be enough."

The others persisted in their refusal, so as I slipped on my blazer I led them into the auditorium.

The house lights were left on. I took them about ten rows down, bidding them to sit while I leaned against the back of a chair another row up and faced them, holding up the page of equations I showed them in the office.

"Look around here for a minute, and then consider these expressions again. With one exception, that the probability universes are simultaneous, this is the model."

Quentin gestured upward. "The *theater*?"

"Not quite to scale, but yes, exactly. This probability—what you'd like to think of as *the* universe—is really no more than that one-twenty-fourth of a second of light hitting the screen, as are all the other probabilities, simultaneously." I gestured out toward the grayish, half-luminous rectangle at the end of the auditorium.

"You have to understand this very carefully," I continued. "If not, you'll never understand the bigger part, which is this: it's *not* the screen I'm talking about; not the piece of film through which the light passes, but the *light itself*, the light that reaches the screen in that one fraction of a second. That's us, from Big Bang to entropy. The whole thing. We are shadows staring at shadows, at least whenever we go to the movies. So it turns out, in a strange way, that life *is* the movies."

The scientists were shifting in their seats, not knowing where to look, stifling groans. The two agents sat with arms folded, much as they would if I had just shown them a driver safety film.

"Multiple-universe hypotheses are unnecessary." Russell looked like he was shaking away a bad dream. "Why should we accept such a complex model? It's ultimately unprovable."

"That's a lot to extrapolate from a few nights batting particles around on the graveyard shift," Quentin said.

I chuckled. "Do you think Thompson worked all this out himself?"

"Then who did? You?" Russell smirked.

"Physics isn't even my specialty. But someone had to show him."

Russell laughed, folding his arms in a kind of mockery of me. "I see. Now they teach theoretical physics at St. Julian's."

I shut the notebook and gripped it tightly. "Theoretical, my ass." I slipped on my 3-D glasses.

It was too close to zero hour. There had been a chance that, disappointed with Thompson's model, they would throw up their hands, leave the eccentric physicist to his broken-down theater and forget that they ever took his research seriously. Even if they decided to leave this second, I couldn't get them out before the gate opened. I could make a run for it or resign myself to selling candy

at the Alma for a long time. . . . No. Once they saw the gate in action, it wouldn't be business as usual for me.

The house lights dimmed.

The agents popped out of their seats like a pair of jack-in-the-box toys, reaching inside their jackets. (For guns? After all this, were they planning to *shoot* Thompson?) A familiar beam of light from the projection booth illuminated the screen behind me with the image of a chorus line. The speakers crackled on and filled the auditorium with the wild syncopation of a trumpet-heavy band. The chorus girls, in their brief bellhop outfits, kicked out in time.

"Up there!" the bald agent shouted, pointing at the booth. They took off up the aisle, out of the auditorium.

"What is all this?" Russell asked, staring at the dancers.

"The third one from the right"—I pointed out the dark-bobbed, long-nosed dancer—"is Mr. Thompson's grandmother. Not a great face, but killer legs, don't you think?"

Russell, the sort of man I'd have thought capable of providing an authoritative response to something like this, didn't have time to answer before the gate opened.

The deafening roar and blinding light nearly knocked the two physicists back over their seats. The noise is like the bark of static from some leviathan stereo speaker, except that the bark just keeps going. The intense light of the open gate is like a prism ablaze. If you need an appropriate comparison, think of staring straight into a projector bulb at point-blank range. It is the bent light of a whole other universe peeping in at this one, through the gate. Even with my glasses, which were a great deal more polarized than the ones I offered to the agents and physicists, it is difficult to see much. I had been standing with my back to the screen, so I avoided the full force of the opening. After all, only Mr. Thompson and I knew what to expect.

So where *was* Mr. Thompson?

Gate openings, unless otherwise arranged, last about thirty seconds. There was no time to ruminate. I leapt into the aisle and broke into a run, shouting "*Sauve qui peut!*" for no one's benefit but my own, with the full intention of aiming myself at the light and keeping on until I was through it.

I couldn't tell if the physicists had recovered yet and were pursuing me. I ran wildly, purse and notebook gripped to my chest, until I smashed into something coming from the approximate direction of the storage room behind the screen. Like particles in a collider, we met and scattered, and I could only hope that what I hit was Mr. Thompson.

For a second, I was in a senseless daze. In the next, I was feeling for my notebook and purse. The purse had come open, and I swept up what I could with my arm against the floor. The notebook was stuck to a gummy patch of something. I yanked at it until the hated pink cover ripped away to become another permanent piece of the theater floor.

My fellow particle helped me up. I could hear a sort of squeal, which was all that I could make of Mr. Thompson shouting something over the din of the open gate. He pointed out into the auditorium, and it was just pos-

sible from that vantage point to discern the four blurry wraiths heading straight for us.

We had seconds left. Thompson went first, jumping the four-foot stage on which the screen rested with the sort of athletic prowess only fear can inspire. He disappeared into the dazzle. I boosted myself up onto the stage just in time to be knocked down by a something/someone flying out.

An object of that weight, hurtling at that velocity, should have insured me of at least a brief stay in the local hospital, but there were enough agents and/or physicists below me to cushion my fall. We were all sent sprawling. Again I grabbed for the notebook. The purse stayed slut this time. Someone stepped on my hair just as I tried to raise myself, ripping out a healthy tuft. I stepped on someone's arm. My left shoulder and forearm were tapping out wild Morse-code throbs of pain. In the uncontrasting glare, I could make out the four pursuers holding someone down (Mr. Thompson? And *which* Mr. Thompson?)—motionless, perhaps unconscious—on the floor. There was nothing I could do for him, and all he could do for me was provide a necessary distraction. With a contortion associated more with a snake than a person, I managed to get up on the stage with the notebook in one hand, purse clutched in the other, and I performed what may be a first in the annals of the Hyperballistic Explorers League by *rolling* myself through the gate.

The gate closed. One Alma Theater was behind me, in another probability. I felt the upward-surging feeling, the sense of polar reversals—north becoming south and south becoming north—and saw the fast-approaching black square (in perfect 1.33:1 aspect ratio) that accompanies a transit. The square enveloped me, and the carnival ride came to a halt.

My eyes adjusted slowly and I struggled for breath. For the first time in what felt like years, I could hear sounds other than the echoes of the gate: voices, to be exact, familiar voices.

"Dammit, Margaret!" came Antonia's melodious roar. "What the hell *happened*? You two were supposed to be the first ones through!"

Beyond the haze sent up by my seared retinas I could see the auditorium of the Alma Theater, with all its splendid murals intact, the floor carpeted—and clean—and all the seats brightly upholstered. Ten rows back Antonia and Colette, in their blazers and neatly pressed skirts, pulled off their black goggles and ran to me.

"Thompson's friends," I gasped, "paid us a visit."

Antonia gave a curt, efficient "Shit!" as she hopped up onto the stage.

"She's hurt!" Colette's blonde curls bounced as she performed a similar maneuver. Antonia stood over me, looking tall and imperious as she brushed back her long, straight brown hair. Colette bent down on one knee and tried to pry my hurt arm from my chest. I yelled in pain.

"No need for torture. I'll talk."

"Margaret . . ." She gave me a sympathetic smile and tried again, a little more gently.

"Something hit me just as I was going through." I

jerked back and partly raised myself. "Where's Mr. Thompson?"

"I'm here, I think."

He was crouched a few feet to my left, breathing heavily but looking undamaged. His forehead and the bald patches above his temples were beaded in sweat. This was the Thompson whose name had really been Owen: the physicist. The person with whom I collided the second time must have been *our* Mr. Thompson, who had agreed to cross over and play gatekeeper when Mr. Thompson/Owen and I returned to this probability.

For a moment, I forgot about the pain in my arm and my stinging scalp. "Oh, God," I groaned. "They've got him!"

Our Mr. Thompson really was a theater owner, had been one for years. He could fill volumes with what he knew about films, but he was completely unschooled in physics. Add to that the fact that the films he knew were from *our* probability, where Orson Welles managed to film *Heart of Darkness* and Lee Tracy starred in *It Happened One Night*. You could imagine what his interrogation by my agent friends was going to be like.

"It was a stupid idea." Two long lines formed on Antonia's smooth forehead. "No one who's not in one of the leagues should be allowed through the gates." She pouted angrily. Her huge, gloomy eyes and delicate features always clashed with her preferred role of Amazon.

"This'll need a sling," Colette said after checking my arm. "It's no more than a sprain." She parted my hair and experimentally touched the still-stinging spot of my scalp. "What the hell happened here?"

"Don't ask."

"No laceration. Just needs a little disinfectant." She stood up. "There's a first aid kit in the office."

"I'll get it." Mrs. Kennelly stood in the front row, her arms folded, face set in its usual expression of annoyance. In manner, she differed little from her counterpart in the probability I'd just left, but our Mrs. Kennelly could have given that woman a few tips on wardrobe and makeup.

"We have to get Mr. Thompson out," I said.

"What else is back there?" Antonia clenched her small hands, into tight fists.

"Some things fell out of my purse. I swept them back in, but something may still be on the theater floor."

She hissed another curse.

"The agent who traced Thompson had been through it already. You know how we work. Just about everything in that purse originated in that probability."

She took a step closer. If those little hands weren't capable of strangling me, they looked like their owner was ready to give it a try. "The point is," she said with exaggerated deliberation, "you don't *know* what may have been left behind."

"There was no time," I sighed. "You'd rather they had gotten me?"

Antonia shook her head, rubbing the spot between her eyebrows. "Only if they promised not to give you back."

"Easy," Colette cautioned. "I'd like to see what you'd have done in her place."

"The movie," Thompson/Owen muttered. "The one with my grandmother. They've got that."

"Oh!" My hand went up to my mouth. "I'm sorry, Mr. Thompson. I know you wanted that film, but it *did* provide us a distraction."

"Forget that." Antonia's voice rose to near-shouting range. "We can get more copies of the film. The problem is that they may notice a chorus girl in there who isn't in any other print of that film in their whole universe."

"They saw the gate open," Thompson/Owen said. "They'll be looking through everything. Margaret"—he pointed at me—"nearly told them everything. I could hear you while I was hiding in the theater."

"Those without eyes cannot be blinded," I said, quoting one of our poets who had no counterpart in his probability. "They had the notebook. They had us. I had to keep them busy while you got yourself back into the theater. And I had to come up with a way to get the notebook back. Part of my job is to monitor how much they know. I told them what I had to about probability conservation to see how they reacted to it. Russell is the only one who may have a clue so far. The others will invent marvelous explanations for everything they saw. Stage lighting. Computer enhancements and alterations. And even if they took your work seriously, who is going to fund the construction of an efficient accelerator? *Your* government?" With my good arm I held up the notebook. "They think you reversed the quark relationships in the third set of expressions. That alone should keep them busy for years."

Mrs. Kennelly returned with the first aid kit. Colette wrapped an elastic bandage around my forearm and tied a sling for me. Getting me to sit still for the disinfectant was harder. Once she was finished, she brushed the hair from her face and helped me down from the stage.

"Save it for your report." Antonia glared at me, lower lip protruding, but her anger was mostly spent. "We have to call the Commission and have this gate closed, perhaps permanently."

"You won't be able to go back for a while. Perhaps not for a long time," Colette said to Thompson/Owen as we made our way up the aisle. "I suppose you'll miss it," she added, less with sympathy than with a certain healthy scientific curiosity.

"There's not much of my world back there to miss." He dropped his hands into the pockets of his cardigan. "'World' doesn't seem to be a very useful term anymore. This is as much my world as the other one . . . with a few notable differences."

In the lobby, Mrs. Kennelly had already returned to counting receipts, the ledger spread out atop the candy counter. I asked her what was playing.

"*Fortier's Rally*," she said, not looking up. From the ledger, The Alma seemed to have had a pretty good evening.

I couldn't resist checking the contents of the candy counter: lemon drops to the left, cherry to the right; peanut butter cups on the bottom shelf and Raisinets on the top.

"Mrs. Kennelly?"

She finished her counting and looked up. Even with eye makeup and fiery lipstick, it was the essential Kennelly face, efficient and private. I wondered if by studying it I could learn something about that icy, silent woman a universe away who left that back door unlocked—for some reason I couldn't doubt it—on purpose.

"I'll make sure the theater is locked up," I told her. "Good night. Thanks for everything."

She stared at me suspiciously, as if I spoke with double meanings. Perhaps I did. She put the ledger into the drawer under the cash register, picked up her jacket from the wooden stool behind the counter, and left through the front doors.

Right behind her was the usher, a tall young man with deep-set eyes. He tucked a copy of *The Custom of the Country* under his arm. He had a Friends of Truth pin on his jacket: *très élite*. As he passed, I couldn't tell if he was smiling at me or at my sling.

Antonia called the Commission from the office. There on the walls were all the invitations: to the right of *Cléo from 5 to 7* was *Heart of Darkness*; above that was *The Last Hurrah* and below it *War of the Worlds*; *The Rules of Frankenstein* balanced *The Evil Game* and between them the girls from *The World of Henry Orient* leapt blissfully into the air.

"Tate says they'll aim a gate at Brighton, about fifteen kilometers north of Burden Park."

"Tate?" I asked.

"He's just been appointed Supervisor. You remember Tate. Moustache. Light brown hair. Cold, iron blue eyes. A Friends of Truth team will go through to get Thompson, if they can. I told them you'll start on a full report in the morning."

"I could go with them," I said, a vivid picture of the usher still in my mind.

Antonia pressed her lips into a hard pink line. "Don't be stupid. They'll recognize you."

"You're right. They didn't think I was much of a genius over there, either."

"As if they would know." Colette patted me in mock sympathy. "Even their best scientists get a little too smug in assuming their expectations are confirmed in mere appearance."

"They seem very specialized." I felt myself cringing at the memory of my interrogation. "They wouldn't know a line of poetry to save their lives."

"That's our strength." Antonia brushed back a strand of her luxuriant hair. "Who would suspect us over there? But I'm afraid your little episode may wise them up a little."

"I wouldn't count on it," I answered, tugging up my socks with some difficulty. "My experience there is limited, but they seem exceptionally adept at rationalization."

For some reason, my remark stirred Mr. Thompson/Owen from his poster-spawned reverie:

"I went to blow the fire aflame,  
But something rustled on the floor,  
And someone called me by my name:  
It had become a glimmering girl

With apple blossom in her hair  
Who called me by my name and ran  
And faded through the brightening air."

"That's our job, *mon vieux*. You wouldn't be here otherwise."

"Let's call it a night," Colette said. "We'll all be getting up early tomorrow."

"Anyone else left here?" I asked.

"The projectionist is still upstairs," Colette said. "Sleeping."

"Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe than ours." I laughed. "And someday he will rise, like Lazarus. But that is a miracle for another world."

I kept my word to Mrs. Kennelly and made sure every door was locked. Outside, Mr. Thompson/Owen and I set out for the diner. Antonia and Colette said good night and took off in the other direction. Most of downtown Burton Park was closed or closing up as we walked down Main Street, past the ice cream shop next door, the drugstore, the news agency and Georgina's Fashions. We stopped for a while to watch the Lionel train trudging around the intricate layout in the window of Harvey's Toy and Hobby.

"There's a probability somewhere where you didn't make it through the gate," he mumbled, half question and half declaration. "Where they're interrogating you this very moment."

"And there is one where *you* didn't make it, and *you* are being interrogated this moment. And one where you and I may have never been born, and one where the Alma was torn down years ago, or destroyed in a fire that started in an overloaded fuse box during a Saturday afternoon matinee. I showed you once how little and how great the differences can be. It's in the throbbing spins of the quarks and the evanescent spread of galaxies on the thin membrane of timespace."

"How do you live with that knowledge?" He shut his eyes, as if imagining a world where the Lionel train jumped the track just at that moment.

"It takes some work. Sometimes I think of all the probabilities as drafts of the same story. It's exciting, in a way. Every moment is a turning point. But that's true even if you never leave your home probability. There's more than one world where a playwright noted the providence in the fall of a sparrow."

"Was it always Shakespeare?"

"He wasn't always called that, but yes, it was always Shakespeare. And he always swiped the image from Matthew, though he's not always called Matthew. That's one of the things you'll learn."

"Will I learn how I can be essentially the same in other probabilities even if in one world my father's name was Owen and in another his name was Thompson?"

"Because your father was *neither* Owen nor Thompson. Even *you* can figure that out."

In the park on the corner of Greenleaf and Anderson, boys and girls were huddled in pairs on benches. In the distance, the bells of a motorcycle-driven hot dog wagon

sounded, conjuring up for me the steam-soaked smell of pickles and tamales.

"What did you mean," I asked, "back in the Alma, about 'notable differences?'"

"I suppose I meant your officially unofficial Commission or Instrumentality or whatever you call it, sending youth clubs with crazy names on perilous journeys to other worlds, like something from a Tom Swift book. It will be a long time before I get used to it."

"More Dean Swift than Tom Swift to me, but I admit it seems awfully crazy. Yours isn't the only probability where rationalization is the better part of reason. But tell me: didn't you ever wish, when you were young, that you were Tom Swift, or at least his best friend? Didn't you want to join the Hyperballistic Explorers League or some such thing? Will we grow up any slower for having some responsibilities other than throwing bake sales and paper drives?"

"Still, something about it seems . . . well, fascistic."

"I've heard that one before. Honestly, I don't know if we are or not. But don't get caught up with superficialities. That's where Quentin and Russell make their mistakes."

He stared at the couples in the park, thinking, or listening to the putt-putt of the hot dog wagon drawing closer. "Will you do me a favor? From now on will you call me by my first name?"

"Alex?" I chuckled. "Very well, *mon vieux*. Whatever you wish."

"You *are* a genius, aren't you?" He looked out at the lights of the Burton Park Industries building, erected on the site of the old, dark, satanic mills.

"Geniuses are attendant *daemons*. You wouldn't mistake me for *that*, would you? Besides, we're all shadows, all of us, in every probability." I gave that statement an appropriate pause. "Too bad you don't know what's *casting* those shadows, isn't it?"

Mr. Thompson/Owen—Alex—came to a full halt, staring at me, waiting.

"The sleeping projectionist. He's the Red king. And when he awakes we're all gone with a blink."

He crumpled his lips until they were set in a half-frown and half-smile, waiting for a "serious" answer.

"Come on." I tugged at his elbow with my free hand. "There's plenty of time for that, and Mom's waiting."

The diner was crowded when we entered. Some men from BPI, straight off the second shift, were heartily debating matters of great importance, as similar men were in an indefinite number of other probabilities. Mom was already pouring two cups of coffee for us.

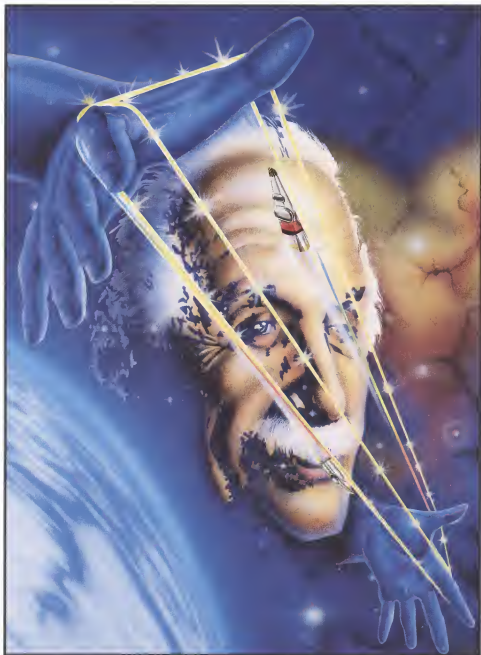
Alex looked at me and smiled, as we waited for her inevitable greeting.

"So when are you going to take me away from all this?"

In an indefinite number of probabilities, the question remained the same, and in another indefinite number of probabilities, Alex had a different answer. In the immediately observable one, he picked up his cup. "Tomorrow is Friday. There's a brand new feature at the Alma."

That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. ♦

# Albert's Cradle



Paul Levinson

On April 15, 1955, Albert Einstein entered Princeton Hospital; he had suffered a rupture of an aortic aneurism two days earlier. On April 17 he telephoned his secretary, Helen Dukas, and asked for writing materials.

He died at 1:15 A.M. the next morning.

## 1

I have spent most of my life trying to coax the truth from nature, and having had some luck in this coaxing, to share the results with my fellow man.

I have achieved a reputation—much of it far beyond what I deserve, some of it having nothing really to do with my accomplishments. (People forget that I am and always was a theorist, not a builder.)

But I feel guilty now—not so much because of what the

Illustration by Paul McCall



world has done with my theories, but because in a sense I haven't been true to my own expectations as a theorist. I have always believed that a scientist must be completely open in laying bare the roots of his theory—for a science clothed in secrecy and lies cannot be validly tested—and yet I have not been completely honest in telling the world how I came up with my theories. In fact, I have left out, and deliberately, what I now see as the most important part.

I propose to rectify that now.

## 2

None of my work would have been possible without Lobachevskian geometry. The common man has much wisdom, but he often does not appreciate the need that the theorist has for expression of his ideas in mathematics. Mathematics, not words, is the natural language of science.

The mathematics of Lobachevski says that two parallel lines can somewhere-someday meet. This still comes as a surprise to most people, who as schoolchildren were raised on the tedious theorems of Euclid. That great Greek wanted to prove that two parallel lines can never meet, but he never did, and so had to settle for an axiomatic statement—a postulate, not a proof. Euclid's parallel postulate.

It was Lobachevski's genius to speculate what happens if we deny this postulate of Euclid's, and construct a whole consistent system of mathematics based on this denial—a system that allows us to describe a space curved and warped by mass.

None of this will be new to those of you familiar with my work. But have any of you ever wondered just what it was that first got me to think along the lines of Lobachevski?

So much of science is explained as originating in lucky, almost accidental insight. I was lucky, yes. But I've come to see that my insight was far from accidental.

It was the result of planning—but not mine—and it came from a child's game.

## 3

I frankly cannot remember who introduced me to Cat's Cradle. I wish I could—in view of the importance I now attach to this game in my life, and the life of our world—but I can't. It could have been any number of little boys whose names I've long ago forgotten.

I do remember when I first made the connection between Lobachevski and the Cat's Cradle game. Lobachevski says two parallel lines may indeed somehow meet. Very well and good. But where on Earth does this happen? The common sense says: nowhere. Euclid's parallel postulate seems to reign on this Earth.

But not in the Cat's Cradle. Are you familiar with this game? Do you know the third position—what children call the pinky crossover? Here we have a configuration of parallel lines—but of course they do meet, because they are in fact all part of one circular string!

So here, I realized all those years ago, here was a real-life demonstration of Lobachevskian geometry. And one right under our noses! (The reader will appreciate that I am here using Lobachevski as a shorthand for the whole series of mathematicians—Gauss and Bolyai and Riemann and the others—who labored on non-Euclidean geometries. But Lobachevski was the first to publish, and the first to write about the intersection of parallel lines.)

The fact that apparently no one had realized this before me had, I must admit with some embarrassment, not really surprised me when I was young. My youthful arrogance and self-estimation could well accept that only I had the insight to see the reversal of the parallel postulate in this child's game. In some way the Cat's Cradle game had prepared my mind to understand the implications of non-Euclidean geometry when I later came in contact with this work, and I've spent most of my life in full pursuit of these implications. But I never mentioned the Cat's Cradle connection—in part, I guess, because I thought the world would think me silly, and the Cat's Cradle origin of my theories even harder to swallow than my theories; in part, because I wanted the glory all to myself; and in part, I know, because I never fully understood the relationship between the Cat's Cradle, Lobachevskian geometry, and my theories of relativity.

I cannot pretend that I understand this relationship in its entirety even now. But I think I know a bit more. Why does the Cat's Cradle provide such a demonstration of Lobachevski? The key, it seems to me, is that the Cat's Cradle is not a natural phenomenon—it is not a crystalline or atomic structure whose formations speak the language of nature to those of us who will listen. No—Cat's Cradle is a humanly created game, which means that its lessons are humanly created ones, information that one generation wanted to pass on to others.

Which means what? That some ancient people understood relativity and sought to instruct us, the future, in its ways, and I am just a conduit of this ancient knowledge? This thought, I must be honest with you, makes my ego reel. But it may be true.

And that is not all. I have been thinking lately that there may be another lesson in the Cat's Cradle.

## 4

I will now make a brief digression—though perhaps not such a digression after all, as I will soon explain.

The magazines have portrayed me very unfairly, though I can well understand their error. I am not the Father of the A-Bomb. True, I did write to the President when I thought that Hitler might soon develop such a weapon. My pacifist friends were furious with me, and I can understand their fury. But what should I have done? Remained passive in the face of someone who was quite prepared to destroy our planet in satisfaction of his insane ambitions?

And when I saw that Hitler had no bomb, and when he was destroyed, I did write a second letter to the President, pleading with him not to use the bomb. But he

died with the letter unopened on his desk, and his successor—the haberdasher—did not have the President's sensibilities.

And now the General's in charge. In truth, I think he's a man of peace. But we're involved now in a war of nerves with the Russians, and each side has the capacity to destroy our planet with their weapons, and so I wonder what would happen were I to publish my next theory now—one that I have of late learned from the ancient Cat's Cradle, and one that is as beyond general relativity as general relativity was beyond Newtonian mechanics.

If used for good ends, starplanes could ensue; if used for ill, I shudder at the consequences.

But the knowledge is there for all to see who are prepared to see it—it is there in the Cat's Cradle played by a million young hands. So if I keep quiet about my new theory, what good would that ultimately do? Is it not better that I should bring it forth now, with at least a glimmer of an understanding of what it might hold for humanity? You see my quandary.

## 5

How old is the game of Cat's Cradle? I believe it is far older than most people realize.

Imagine, if you will, a people with intelligence every bit the equal of ours, yet without the wonderful invention of writing. Possessed of such intelligence, these people would be able to beckon many secrets from nature. But without writing, how would these people tell others about these secrets?

Yes, I suppose they might not want to share their knowledge. Cultures can be base and selfish. But an individual, learning some new knowledge, is driven by a fire, quite irresistible, to share this knowledge with others—to bask in its light.

Ancient songs are no doubt one way the non-literate shared their knowledge. But the verbal can only convey so much—and certainly the twists and turns of space and time under pressure of mass and acceleration outstrip the ability of any singer to communicate, however gifted.

The Cat's Cradle can convey the third and fourth dimensions. Imagine, then, our letterless ancient people, possessed of a mathematics they could not write. But they could render the mathematics in the lines and shift positions of the Cat's Cradle. Each cross a number, each space a vector, each shift the expression of an acceleration into a new system. I confess that even now I have little more than a vulgar understanding of what these people were doing.

But once a long time ago they knew. Once they conveyed with astonishing precision and simplicity the movement of the heavens and more. Yet time dulls precision. Who knows how long the equations in the strings were passed on from generation to generation with accuracy, with their meaning understood? The accuracy

likely is with us still; but the meaning has been gone a very long time for most of us. It lasted centuries, millennia maybe. Yet eventually those who taught others to do the Cat's Cradle knew only the moves, and not the mathematics they represented. And so these vessels of great equations became little more than childhood rhyme, playthings of all technique and no content, kinesthetic mantras. . . .

And then I came along. Or perhaps I wasn't the first, who knows? Maybe Leonardo's equations in the mirror were reflections of his boyhood tutoring in the strings. Maybe others. Who can say? But Leonardo's writings led to submarines and airplanes, and mine have led to this wretched bomb. So perhaps the world would have been better had we not come along, or not understood.

## 6

I never liked the subjective interpretation of quantum mechanics—information does seem to travel faster than the speed of light in these tiny precincts, yes; but the explanation of Bohr and Heisenberg that this speed is somehow a function of our observation has always struck me as too easy, an incomplete theory. Somewhere in reality, quite independent of our observation, a hidden variable must exist that accounts for such quantum mechanic phenomena.

I know what a wet blanket I've been all of these years in not accepting the subjective Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics. And I know I haven't been a very good scientist in all of this—offering no proof or evidence or even theory of my own against QM, only my own cranky misgivings.

What have these misgivings been based on? I know now that I must have acquired them in the Cat's Cradle games—in code that was right alongside the shapes and twists that long ago led to me to special and general relativity. And I know now that these codes express the workings of a much greater theory—the unified theory that explains cosmic and quantum mechanical phenomena alike, the theory that has long tempted and eluded, but has been staring at me from the face of my childhood all this time.

Should I now present this theory to the world? Will our species use it wisely—to go out to the stars—or will they try to create from it a worse atom bomb, a worse hydrogen bomb, one that could destroy not only this planet but the entire cosmos?

## 7

I realize that anyone reading this will find many more questions than answers. Who were these people who wrote to me of the universe via the Cat's Cradle? What is the outline of my unified theory that can take our species to the stars?

I'll try to answer these questions tomorrow. ♦

# Nothing Up Her Sleeve

Tanya Huff

Leather soles slapped down against sand and rock, and something in the sound convinced the small grey-brown lizard that it might be safer to move off the path. Claws scrabbling for purchase, it launched itself forward just as a booted foot came down smack on its patch of warm ground. Jewel-bright eyes peered out from the safety of a pile of loose rubble and, if looks could kill, the wearer of the boots would not have reached the end of the road.

As it was, the boots went only another seven paces forward, then stopped at a low coral wall. The air crackled and the lizard dove deeper under cover. Over countless generations, lizards living on the headland had learned that magic meant trouble, and this particular lizard had no intention of getting involved.

Edges wavering under brilliant sunlight, a gate appeared in the coral wall. Less than a heartbeat later, the wall was



Illustration by Ross Mathis

whole again. For some moments, the gate appeared, disappeared, appeared, disappeared—in the end, the wall remained whole. Not even a well-placed kick had any effect, although certain vehemently expressed profanities adding heat to the already tropical temperatures suggested that the wall had won that round as well.

At four feet high, it should have been easy enough to go over. It wasn't. Finally, the boots stomped back down the path, turned, and pounded toward the wall at full speed.

"He's going to hurt himself, Mistress."

"You're probably right, Kali," Magdelene admitted around a piece of papaya. She leaned one elbow on the wide stone sill of the kitchen window and sighed. Watching the intruder had been an amusing way to pass an afternoon too hot for physical activity, but his repeated failures were becoming embarrassing—like laughing at a disability. "Well, I suppose as he wants to come in so badly, I'd better go out and talk to him." Popping the last bit of fruit into her mouth, she straightened.

"Shall I serve chilled juices in the garden?"

Magdelene shook her head. "Better make it something stronger," she advised. "He looks like he could use a drink."

The coral wall loomed closer, closer . . . Micholai put out one hand, stiff-armed himself into the air, and landed on his side with enough force to knock the breath from his lungs—a gate having just appeared under the point he was attempting to vault.

Gasping, he rolled over onto his back and squinted up at a pair of tanned legs exposed to an immodest height. Above the legs, a turquoise shift covered full curves, and above that pale grey eyes peered down at him from under a thick mass of chestnut hair. When he recognized the expression, he scrambled indignantly to his feet.

"My name," he said, attempting to dislodge a fine coating of sand from the surface of his black wool robe, "is Lord Wizard Micholai and I wish to speak with Magdelene, the one they call the most powerful wizard in the world." His tone clearly indicated that whoever they were, he didn't believe them. "You may take me to her."

Thick lashes lowered against the sun, the woman looked him up and down and smiled. "You're already talking to her," she told him.

He managed a strangled, "You?"

Her smile broadened. The alleged most powerful wizard in the world had a bit of fruit caught between two teeth.

"You know, Micholai, you'd be a lot more comfortable if you took off that robe."

Micholai clutched the robe more tightly around him as he sat—with some difficulty—on the low, deep seat of a cane chair. He wasn't entirely certain why he'd agreed to join her for drinks in the garden or even if he actually had. "This robe," he declared indignantly, "identifies me as a wizard."

"True enough," Magdelene acknowledged, sitting down across from him and picking up a large palm-frond fan. "But as *I* know you're a wizard and *you* know you're a wizard, don't you think it's rather unnecessary?"

"No!"

"Suit yourself." She leaned back and flapped the fan. Micholai blinked sweat out of his eyes and tried not to lean toward the cool breeze the fan created.

An avid observer of young men, Magdelene placed Micholai's age somewhere between twenty and thirty. At the moment, he wasn't looking his best. His brown hair lay limp and matted with sweat, his nose was peeling, and his slightly bloodshot brown eyes darted back and forth between gritty lashes—searching, Magdelene deduced with some amusement, for an escape route. As she couldn't get him out of it, she had to assume the robe covered all the usual bits in the correct proportion.

She wondered if the self-important, stiff-necked attitude that made him refuse to relax was a result of his mission, his age, or an innate part of his character. Reaching across the tiny patio, she pushed at his knee with one bare foot. "Calm down. I don't bite."

"That, Mistress, is not entirely accurate." Kali set a tray holding two frosted glasses and a pitcher of liquid down on a three-legged table.

Micholai paled as the green-skinned, ivory-horned demon stretched out a taloned hand and offered him a drink. "It's true," he gulped. "You . . . you're served by demons!"

"Who is currently trying to serve you," Magdelene pointed out. "Take the glass and say thank you."

Fingers shaking only slightly less than his voice, he did as he was told.

"You're welcome," Kali told him. She handed Magdelene the second glass. "Will we be having him for supper?" she asked, her expression unreadable.

Micholai choked.

Magdelene sighed. "If you mean will he be staying for supper, I think so. You'll have to excuse my housekeeper," she continued as Kali returned to the kitchen. "Her command of human language is a tad idiosyncratic. Now, then"—she took a long swallow and sat back contentedly—"you've told me your name but not why you're here."

Suddenly recalled to his duties, Micholai wiped his chin and squared his shoulders. "I," he declared, "represent THE COUNCIL OF WIZARDS."

"The what?"

"THE COUNCIL OF WIZARDS."

Magdelene scratched at the back of her right calf with the toes of her left foot and frowned. "Never heard of them," she said at last.

"But . . ."

"Look, Micholai, why don't you just relax, take off your robe . . ."

"I am *not* taking off my robe!"

"All right, all right, keep it on." She lazily pushed her hair back off her face. "But start at the beginning. Who or what are the Council of Wizards?"

Micholai took a deep breath and a long drink, only

barely managing to keep them separate. This was not how he'd imagined this confrontation, but the debacle at the gate had shaken his confidence and the wizard he'd come to confront was not like any wizard he'd ever imagined. *Take control from the beginning*, the council had said. Sure, easy for them to say. They weren't being watched as though they were some new and not very interesting form of entertainment. "THE COUNCIL OF WIZARDS . . ." He felt blood rising up under the sunburn on his cheeks and began again. "The, uh, Council of Wizards is made up of the five most powerful wizards in the world . . ."

Magdelene's brows nearly touched her hairline.

" . . . and, well, they run things."

"What sort of things?"

"Wizard things."

"Ah. And why haven't I ever heard of them?"

"They *tried* to contact you." His voice picked up a decidedly defensive tone. "But they couldn't raise your crystal . . ."

"Don't have one."

Micholai's eyes widened, and one hand rose to cup his own crystal protectively. It had been the greatest day of his life when after years of apprenticeship he'd been presented by the council with the badge of his accomplishment. "But all wizards wear a crystal."

She stretched, sweat-damp skin pressing against the thin cotton shift and sticking. "I don't."

As it was very obvious that she didn't, Micholai wet his lips and continued. "They tried to break into your scrying but you flung their power back at them with so much force that it knocked the Lady Wizard Gillian off her stool."

"Not that I noticed, but it serves her right. Was she hurt?"

"She was very embarrassed." Micholai's lips twitched into an involuntary smile as he remembered how Lady Wizard Gillian had bounced back onto the floor, robe flapping, crystal swinging, perpetually sour expression overlaid with indignant disbelief. When he saw Magdelene sharing the smile, he forced himself to frown. "A wizard's dignity is not to be trifled with."

Magdelene's smile broadened. "That sounds like a quote."

His traitorous lips began to curve again. "Yes, well. Anyway, as conventional methods appeared to be of no use, the council sent me to contact you."

"And are you a member of the council?"

"No. That is, not yet."

Magdelene let that lie.

"A number of wizards work *with* the council. And they have a large training center."

"I see. And what does the Council of Wizards want?"

"You're to appear before them for a disciplinary hearing."

She blinked. "For a what?"

"A disciplinary hearing." He pulled at the collar of his robe. "I was instructed to tell you that if you don't come with me, action would be taken."

"Action? Never mind." A lazy wave cut off his explanation. "So, where do *they* want you to take me?"

"They have a stronghold high in the Kurel Mountains."

"The Kurel Mountains . . ." Place names had changed more than once since Magdelene had settled in the south. "Isn't it late spring there now? With soft breezes and new grass and wild flowers?" She sighed and rubbed absently at a puddle of sweat caught in the crook of her elbow. "I think I'd like to see spring again. We'll leave tomorrow."

It had gone much better than Micholai had thought it would during his assault on the gate. "Fine. Tomorrow." He stood, ignoring protests from various parts of his body.

Magdelene stood as well. "And for now, I'll have Kali run you a nice cool bath. While you're in it, she can clean your clothes—including that robe you're so attached to. Then we'll sit down to a heaping platter of shrimp with a nice salad on the side. . . . What's the matter?" His shoulder was rigid under her hand.

"I can't . . ."

"Nonsense. You can so. Unless you'd rather sleep outside the gate in case I attempt to escape?"

He'd intended on doing exactly that. Somehow it seemed a little silly.

"Wouldn't you rather be comfortable and well fed? Of course you would." She steered him, unsure but unprotesting, toward the house.

For the first time in his life, Micholai wondered if the Council of Wizards knew just what they were getting into.

"A Council of Wizards, Kali. Can you believe it? What's next?"

"Breakfast." The demon set a plate of fresh bran muffins on the table.

Magdelene shook her head as she spread the butter.

"All tucked neatly into one place . . ."

"Perhaps they are not aware of the danger."

"Well, they're going to be."

Some time later, Magdelene stared at the younger wizard in irritation. Bathed, fed, and rested, he was actually quite attractive. Unfortunately, his appearance had nothing to do with her mood. "What do you mean, you can't just transport us? You've been there, Don't you know the spell?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"If you need more power, I can supply it."

"No, it's just . . ."

"Don't try to tell me I've got to spend an uncomfortable amount of time travelling because I won't do it."

"It's more complicated than that . . ."

"If I'm putting myself out to do something for somebody," Magdelene muttered—at the sink behind her, Kali rolled her eyes—"I don't like being inconvenienced."

"It's nothing personal!" Micholai protested, once again on the defensive. "*No one* can transport directly to the stronghold. The council has wrapped the area in spells so strong that the closest anyone can arrive is five days out."

"Why?"

"Demons." Shooting a nervous look at Kali's back, he leaned forward and lowered his voice. "The spell leaves too obvious a signature. The council is afraid demons will track it and mass for an attack, wiping out the cream of wizardry in one battle."

Magdelene snorted. "Leaving aside, for the moment, your rather loose definition of the cream of wizardry, hasn't it occurred to your council that the stronghold itself is probably leaving enough of a signature to attract some attention?"

"They've taken care of that."

"How? With more spells?" She shifted her small traveling bag from her right hand to her left and sighed. "Well, I'm packed, I'm dressed, I suppose I can find some way to survive five days on the road. Where *can* you transport us to?"

"Sherilac. It's a trading city where the Lea joins the Kan."

The names of what were probably rivers meant nothing to her. "It's been a long time since I was in a city of any size," Magdelene mused thoughtfully.

Kali made choking noises which Magdelene chose to ignore.

"Do you prefer to begin your transport spell outside or in?" she asked.

"Uh, outside."

When Micholai moved to follow her out the kitchen door, the demon's voice brought him up short.

"Lord Wizard."

Preening a little at the honorific, he turned.

"A word of advice, Lord Wizard." Kali jerked her horns in the direction her mistress had taken. "When you get to city, keep her moving."

Micholai frowned. "Keep her moving?"

The demon nodded. "It's safer," she said.

"'Tis a wizard!"

The town had appeared nearly deserted until on a street by the harbor an old man had recognized Micholai and sent up the call.

Micholai inclined his head graciously as people began to gather. "It's the robe," he told Magdelene smugly, raised a near regal hand in salute, and added, "If *you* wore a robe, I'm sure they'd be this excited to see you."

Magdelene, who had forgotten that spring could mean grey and glowering skies, cold winds, and drizzle just as easily as gentle breezes and flowers, growled inarticulately. The growl became a pained grunt as a stout shopkeeper, his fine clothes soaked with dirty water, drove a beefy elbow into her side while attempting to shove her out of his way. Said shopkeeper found himself suddenly some distance outside the city gates wearing only his boots. Magdelene hated being cold, she really hated being cold and wet, and considering how she felt about being cold, wet, and bruised, she figured he could consider himself lucky she'd left him the boots.

She frowned as word continued to spread and more and more people scurried up from the waterfront. Although Micholai apparently accepted the crowd as his wizardly due, growing increasingly more full of himself with every cheer, Magdelene rather suspected there was

more to it. When the mass of townsfolk up ahead parted to allow an official delegation through, she jabbed her companion sharply in the ribs. "Looks like they're about to hand you the key to the city."

"Wizards," Micholai informed her down the length of his nose, "are highly thought of around here."

"So are ratcatchers," Magdelene pointed out tartly.

"But there's a *reason* for that."

"Lord Wizard, thank Kelpetro you've come in time."

The mayor, his chain of office thrown on over a mud-stained jerkin, grabbed Micholai by the shoulder and dragged him forward. "We've got to hurry. The water's almost here!"

"I should think you've got quite enough of that already," Magdelene muttered, pushing damp hair back off her face.

The mayor ignored her, propelling Micholai over rain-slicked cobblestones toward the harbor. "It's been weeks since we sent the messenger up the mountain. We were afraid no one was going to come."

"But . . ." Micholai protested, trying unsuccessfully to free his robe from the larger man's grip.

The mayor ignored *him* too. "The sandbags are only just containing the flooding. If you hadn't come, we'd have lost half the town."

"But . . ."

"We've done what we can, Lord Wizard. Now it's up to you."

"But . . ."

"Fall back! Fall back! Give the Lord Wizard room to work!"

"Now you say 'but' again," Magdelene prompted as Micholai stared in silent horror down the length of the harbor breakwater. Wet and exhausted townspeople scrambled past them to the relative safety of the shore and stood waiting expectantly.

Micholai shot her a panicked glance and cleared his throat. "Just, uh, what exactly is the problem?"

"The Lea's flooded," the mayor explained. "Mudslide upriver held most of the spring runoff. Kelpetro-cursed thing cleared this morning. When it gets here . . ." Both hands graphically illustrated what the town could expect. ". . . we go with."

"And you want me to . . . uh . . ."

Magdelene rolled her eyes. "Stop it," she suggested.

"That's right." The mayor looked at her for the first time. "Who are you?"

She gave him her second best smile. "I'm with the wizard."

A moment later, they were picking their way carefully along the top of the breakwater. The river water swirled brown and angry against the sandbags, surging over them in a number of places, forcing its way through in others.

"I can't do this," Micholai protested, unable to stop moving because of the firm pressure of Magdelene's hand between his shoulder blades. "Anything of this magnitude has to be cleared with the Council of Wizards."

"Sounds like they tried that."

"There are rules!"



"Break them."  
"Wizards are not permitted to use their power to interfere in the lives of those who have no power."

"That's a stupid rule."  
"We can't always be taking care of them. They've got to take care of themselves."

"They tried. They can't do anything about this."  
He pulled away from her hand and turned to face her.  
"So then . . ."

"They die."  
"No."  
"That's what your rules say."

Micholai squinted past her to the townspeople grouped expectantly on the shore. He groped for his crystal.

"Power without structure is chaos."  
Magdelene grabbed him by the front of his robe and shoved him around to face upstream. "Structure without flexibility is bullshit," she yelled as the muted snarl of the river grew suddenly louder. "And you've just run out of time."

Sweeping up everything it passed, a seething wall of water roared toward them. Then it was closer to them than they were to shore.

"Raise your arm!"  
"What?"

She grabbed his wrist and threw his arm into the air. The wall of water leapt up with it, curving over the harbor, over the docks, over the heads of the crowd. Huge trees, boulders torn from the mountain, the shattered remains of buildings ripped off their foundations twisted and spun in the muddy arch. The noise was nearly deafening. Magdelene stuck her fingers in her ears.

Micholai stood frozen, knowing full well he'd had nothing to do with this but afraid to lower his arm. Only when it was finally over, when the danger had been diverted past the town, did he let it drop to his side, pins and needles wrapped around it from elbow to fingertip.

"Why?" he demanded.  
Magdelene stepped back as the first of the hysterically grateful townspeople threw themselves down the length of the retaining wall. "I try to keep a low profile," she explained, not entirely truthfully. A dozen clutching hands all tried to get a piece of the wizard who'd saved the town. "Besides, you're the one in the robe."

"It's a beautiful spring day out there, Micholai. Too bad you can't leave the room without being swarmed." Magdelene ignored the scowl he shot her and dropped her travelling bag on the floor by the wide balcony doors.  
"Wait until you see what I bought. It's exactly what we need for travelling up into the mountains. You know, this really is a very nice place." Her fingers stroked the soft nap of a brilliantly patterned, multicolored shawl.  
"The weavers here do the most amazing things with sheep. Pity you couldn't have come with me."

"Magdelene . . ."  
"Of course, that robe of yours does make you stick out like a tall, dark, sore thumb."

"Magdelene . . ."  
"Still, everyone knows you're a wizard, and that is

what's important, people throwing themselves at your feet, kissing your hem, even if it does keep you cooped up on such a . . ."

"Magdelene!" He crossed the room and grabbed her shoulders. "I got the point the first time. I am *not* stupid!"

The corners of her mouth quirked up. "Of course you're not," she told him kindly, grey eyes sparkling. "You're a wizard."

It was probably fortunate that a sudden knocking at the door cut off his reply.

"Hey, Magdelene! Where do you want the carpet?"  
"Over there by the window, Bruno."

The burly man followed her pointing finger, the huge roll of carpet resting lightly on one broad shoulder. "You had to be on the top floor," he grumbled good-naturedly. "Couldn't be down at street level. Oh, no. Had to be up three flights of stairs."

"I did it on purpose." Magdelene watched appreciatively as he crossed the room. "I wanted to see those rippling muscles covered in a fine sheen of sweat."

He laughed and let the carpet fall. "Well, as long as you had a good reason." He turned, saying, "Maybe we should try it out, you and I." Then he spotted Micholai and blushed a deep crimson. "Lord Wizard. Your pardon. I didn't see!" The speed of his exit invalidated the common belief that big men were slow men.

Micholai spread his hands helplessly at Magdelene's glower. "I didn't do it on purpose!"

"I know you didn't." Her expression softened as she realized how much the porter's reaction really had upset him, and she decided that lessons were over for the moment. After all, she still had five days on the trail to make him into a human being. "Don't worry about it. Come and see what I bought."

"I thought you'd never been to Sherilac before."

"I haven't." Tongue between her teeth, she worked at the cords holding the carpet rolled.

"But he spoke like he knew you . . ."

"Who? Bruno? I met him this morning."

Micholai shook his head and couldn't help a note of censure creeping into his voice. "You shouldn't tease strangers like that."

"I shouldn't, or wizards shouldn't?"

"Uh . . ."

She laughed, much as Bruno had, and leapt up off her knees. "Then you'll be happy to know I wasn't, in the strictest sense of the word, teasing."

He shook his head. "You couldn't have meant to . . . I mean, wizards don't!"

"Of course they do. Where do you think little wizards come from?"

"He was a porter!"

"He was a hunk," Magdelene corrected. "And a nice man. And your attitude is beginning to irritate me. Fortunately, I refuse to allow you to ruin my good mood." With a wave of her hand, the carpet unrolled. "What do you think?"

Greens and blues and oranges and yellows, in every possible variation of noncomplementary shades, chased

each other around and around and around the border. The central design was . . . Micholai squinted, but it didn't help; he had no idea what the central design was. Was, in fact, willing to believe that it hadn't been designed at all. That it had just happened. It wasn't the sort of carpet a wizard would be caught dead on. He opened his mouth to tell her so, had a sudden memory of thousands of tons of moving water rising into the air, wondered just how irritated an honest response would get her, and said, "I bet you got a good deal on it."

"You wouldn't believe it." She set her travelling bag over a particularly virulent bit of pattern and dropped down beside it. "Well, come on."

Micholai took a step backward. "Where?"

"To see the Council of Wizards. Remember?"

"On that?"

"Why not?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, completely in control for the first time since his failure at the coral wall. Her stunt with the river had almost had him believing that most-powerful-wizard-in-the-world stuff.

"Magdelene, flying carpets are a myth. Extensive research has proven that they wouldn't . . . wouldn't . . . uh . . ."

The carpet hovered two feet off the floor, fringes quivering as though it were anxious to be off.

Magdelene gave him her second best smile. "You coming or just breathing hard?"

"Magdelene!?"

"Oh, calm down and sit." She patted a luminously awful bit of weave beside her.

Fingers folded tightly around his crystal, Micholai shook his head.

"Either get on, or I'm leaving without you."

A sudden vision of how the council would react to Magdelene arriving unescorted moved him carefully onto the carpet. They deserved a warning at least. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

She shrugged as they flew out the window and began to climb. "How hard can it be? There's nothing up here to hit. Besides . . ." Lounging back against her travelling case, she waved at an astonished gull. ". . . if you think I'm spending five long, tiring days slogging up a mountain, you're out of your mind."

As the phrase *I'm out of my mind* had just been in the forefront of Micholai's thoughts, he closed his eyes, tried not to think about how far it was to the ground, and decided not to argue.

The five days of travel differed only in that Micholai finally relaxed enough to open his eyes and look down. Once. Then he wished he hadn't as Magdelene, encouraged by his interest, put the carpet through two loops and a barrel roll.

But the nights . . .

The first night, Magdelene pulled a red-and-white striped tent, two folding beds, a four course meal, a pair of crystal goblets, and a bottle of very good wine out of a

travelling bag six inches wide by a little over twice that high.

"H-h-how?" Micholai's fingers were white around the edges of the full plate he'd just been handed.

Magdelene looked confused. "Micholai, you're a wizard. How do you think?"

Micholai blushed. "Oh. Right."

On the second night, prompted by the screech of an owl in the darkness, Magdelene told of her encounter with the last of the great dragons and the half-dozen knights who were determined to kill it. With her legs tucked up under her and the fire dancing flame-colored highlights through her hair, she barely looked old enough to be dragon bait, let alone dragon savior.

Micholai listened, eyes wide. Had he heard the story from anyone else, about anyone else, he would have reacted with awe. It was, however, impossible to be in awe of Magdelene, no matter what she did—although an incident involving two of the knights had him as close to awe as he was likely to get.

The third night, after supper, she asked him what it was he liked about being a wizard. Something in her tone convinced him that she really wanted to hear the answer. Although his list began in council-approved places, under the power of her listening, he discovered joys he'd forgotten during the long years of training.

". . . but, I guess what I really like is that, well, terrific feeling that comes from doing something so absolutely wondrous and impossible . . ."

Later, after the fire had died to white-red embers, he heard her say, so softly he wasn't sure she was talking to him, "You didn't mention the robe."

On the fourth night, one of the crystal glasses shattered and without thinking, Micholai fused the pieces back into a seamless whole.

Magdelene gave him her second best smile but said only, "Thank you."

On the fifth night, Magdelene discovered that Micholai possessed a fine tenor voice. She kept him singing until he pleaded for sleep.

"You couldn't have decided to sing four nights ago," she sighed as they made their way to their separate beds. "You just *bad* to wait until the last night. . . ."

The stronghold of the Council of Wizards looked pretty much exactly the way tradition suggested it should. Thick stone walls surrounded a cluster of buildings dominated by the brooding bulk of a tower. The original builders had used the local granite, and in the early morning sun the whole place gleamed a soft off-white.

"Almost pretty," Magdelene observed as they swooped over the last mile.

"Land outside the wall," Micholai told her, cracking one eye open just enough to see where they were.

"Don't be silly. Tell me where it is, and I'll land right in the Council Chamber."

"Magdelene, there's a ring of defensive spells . . ." The carpet passed over the outer battlements. Micholai made choking noises.

Magdelene reached over and patted him on one robe-covered knee. "Look, I really don't want to get you in trouble so I'll set her down here in the courtyard. Okay." "Just land. Please."

The inhabitants of the stronghold froze at their tasks and watched in astonishment as the world's ugliest carpet drifted gently to the ground. They stared from windows and doorways as a chestnut-haired woman wearing turquoise trousers and a salmon pink tunic stood, stretched and declared in ringing tones, "There now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Expressions changed as they recognized her companion.

"Micholai! What do you think you are doing?"

Micholai scrambled to his feet and tried, unsuccessfully, to smooth the creases from his robe. "Lady Wizard Gillian! I, uh . . . That is, we . . . Uh, I mean . . . This is Magdelene."

"So I assumed," Gillian shot a venomous glare over Micholai's shoulder. "I don't know what you're trying to prove, missy, but research has determined that flying carpets are not possible."

Magdelene blinked.

"And what's more, those defensive spells on the wall were put there for a reason. You had no business going through them in such a way."

"How should I have gone through them?"

"How *should* you have gone through them?" Gillian snorted. "And you call yourself the most powerful wizard in the world. Ha."

"Uh, Lady Wizard Gillian . . ."

"Be quiet, Micholai." Gillian turned, sketched two arcane symbols in the air and declaimed two lines in a language that seemed mostly made up of consonants. An unseen bell in the tower began to toll. "THE COUNCIL OF WIZARDS will meet immediately," she declared, spun on one heel, and strode away. "As you have brought her this far, Micholai, you can escort her to the Council Chamber."

"Did she have an unhappy childhood or something?" Magdelene asked as Micholai indicated they should follow the senior wizard.

His brows drew down and his right hand rose to wrap around his crystal. "Magdelene, you've got to start taking this seriously."

"Oh, I am," she told him, motioning for her travelling bag to go on ahead.

Somehow, he wasn't reassured.

"Magdelene, you stand accused before this COUNCIL OF WIZARDS of actions endangering *all* wizards." The Lord Wizard Wang Fu leaned forward, palms flat on the high oak bench the council used when it sat in session. "To wit, the stirring up the rancor of the demonkind by willfully destroying one of their princes."

"Is *that* what all this is about?"

"Isn't it enough?" Lady Wizard Fatima exclaimed, tap-

ping one polished fingernail against the wood. "The completely unnecessary destruction of the sixth demon prince has upset the balance of power and put us all in a great deal of danger."

Magdelene stopped trying to find a comfortable position in the intricately carved marble chair, suspecting she'd found the reason why the council seemed so generally cranky. "You seem to be forgetting that I upset the balance of power in our favor," she pointed out.

Lady Wizard Tatiana shook her head, grey curls whipping back and forth. "No, no, no. Balance is the important factor when dealing with the Netherhells. Our favor, their favor—all that is completely unimportant."

"It was important to me at the time," Magdelene said dryly. "What does the council *suggest* I should have done when Kan Kon challenged me?"

"You should not have accepted the challenge." Wang Fu was adamant. The rest of the council nodded in agreement.

"Trust me on this one. Demons don't work that way."

"We know how demons operate." Lord Wizard Manuel sniffed. "We have devoted years to the study of the Netherhells."

Lord Wizard Manuel had lovely dark eyes and long sultry eyelashes. Magdelene decided she didn't like him anyway. "Ever been there?"

"Don't be impertinent. It is a well known fact that wizards can not survive in the Netherhells."

Magdelene rolled her eyes. "Suit yourself," she muttered. "You will anyway."

Lady Wizard Gillian, a white-and-purple crystal of truly immense proportions cupped in both hands, cleared her throat, the sound pulling the other members of the council around to face her. "Your willful and unnecessary action," she declared, "has stirred up the Netherhells. We are therefore decided to take action before we are all swept away on a crimson tide of revenge."

"Oh, puh-lease . . ."

"This council can no longer allow you to continue blithely doing whatever you wish." Gillian's lips thinned. "We were, in the past, prepared to be lenient. . . ."

"About what?" Magdelene interjected.

"The demon you keep in your household, for starters," Fatima declared.

"I saved her life. By demonic rules that makes her life mine."

Gillian waved that away. "We *know* you consorted with a bard."

Magdelene leaned forward. "Consorted?" she repeated. "You bore him a son!" Fatima said scornfully. "Don't deny it!"

"Oh, I wasn't denying it," Magdelene explained. "I just thought you needed a stronger verb."

"As I said," Gillian snapped, "we *were* prepared to be lenient, in spite of your refusal to act as befits your power. You have been, for all the centuries of this council, a disgrace to the title *Lady Wizard*. You ignore our traditions, you scoff at our authority. . . ."

"I didn't even know you existed until Micholai landed in my backyard."

"My point exactly. We are THE COUNCIL OF WIZARDS. What are you? You have no crystal! You have no robe!"

"I wondered when we were going to get to that," Magdelene murmured.

Gillian surged to her feet, eyes blazing. "And yet you dare to place *us* in danger! Power confers a responsibility you have chosen to ignore. You have given us no choice. We are forced to remove your power!"

The silence that fell was terrible and profound. The Council stared at Magdelene, their expression ranging from gentle superiority to barely concealed glee. Magdelene stared back at the council, her expression nearly making it to polite interest.

"You think," Gillian continued, crystal swinging back against her chest with a meaty thud, "that we can't do this. We have heard you call yourself the most powerful wizard in the world." Her eyes narrowed. "But there are five of us and only one of you. I think you'll find that our combined power is not to be scoffed at."

"Was I scoffing?"

"Research has proven," Manuel said smoothly, "that you can not win if you choose to fight."

"Fight?" Magdelene rested one hand against her breast. "Me? I readily admit to being lazier than any other five wizards of my acquaintance. You'll get no fight from me."

Gillian lowered herself slowly back into her chair. "I'm glad to see you're being so reasonable about the inevitable. You'll find we can be reasonable as well; have you any words to speak in your defense?"

"No." Magdelene stood and brushed her hair back out of her eyes. "But I have a couple to say about yours. One." She ticked the points on her fingers. "You might just as well transport in and out of this place; there's enough power gathered here that every map in the Netherhells has this place marked with a big red X. I may have stirred up the demonkind, but if they attack here it's not my fault. Large concentrations of wizards never last long."

"We have lasted over two and a half centuries," Wang Fu sneered.

Magdelene sighed. "I have hickies older than that. Two, rules and regulations won't work against the demonkind. They don't follow your rules, they follow their own and those change without notice. Three," she said, spreading her hands, "you'd be a lot more comfortable out of those robes."

"Enough of this mockery!" Gillian bellowed, slamming her fist down on the table. "We will deal with you now! Draw the circles. Light the incense."

Magdelene obliged.

"Not you!" Gillian shrieked.

With varying degrees of annoyance, the council moved to enclose Magdelene in their midst.

"Should I sit, stand, what?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter," Tatiana spat, taking her position. "You'll soon be put in your place."

On Gillian's signal, the council began to chant. With right hands cupped around crystals, they extended their lefts so that a quintet of palms faced inward. It didn't

take long. The five crystals flared briefly, then dimmed. The five members of the council looked pleased with themselves.

Magdelene scratched her nose. "So, if I throw myself on the mercy of the council, can I get a lift home?"

Kali turned from the sink at the crack of displaced air.

"Back already, Mistress?"

Magdelene shrugged and set her travelling bag down on the kitchen floor. "They've been warned."

"How did they take it?"

"They took away my powers."

"They took away your powers," Kali repeated, crossing her arms across her chest.

"Uh-huh."

The demon looked disgusted. "Is that *all*?"

"Not quite." Magdelene frowned at the sudden realization. "Those pompous sons-of-bitches kept my carpet!"

"Mistress, do you sense it?"

"Pretty hard to miss, isn't it?" Magdelene yawned, stretched and stood. It had been a wonderful six weeks—lying in the sun, swimming, eating, attempting to get in and out of her hammock using no magic—but as parts of her house had got completely out of hand without supervision, she supposed it was time to call an end. "Don't wait up, Kali."

Kali sniffed. "I never do, Mistress."

A heartbeat later, Magdelene stood just inside the gates of the council's stronghold.

"Magdelene!"

"Good grief, Micholai, you look awful!"

He staggered forward, swayed, and nearly fell. Grey-blue shadows ringed his eyes. One sleeve of his robe appeared to have been chewed off. "Demons . . . From out of nowhere. We barely got the gate closed after the council . . ."

"The council opened the gate?"

"They went out to talk."

"To demons?" Inflated egos were one thing but blatant stupidity was something else again. "What happened?"

He shook his head. "What do you think?"

She shook her head in turn. "What a pity. With the council gone, who's going to give me back my power?"

Micholai sighed and sagged down on a pile of rubble. "Don't be more difficult than necessary, Magdelene. After I thought about it for a little while, I realized that the council could no more take away your power than it could . . ."—one corner of his mouth quirked up—" . . . force you to put on one of these stupid robes."

Leaning forward, she gently brushed a bit of slightly charred hair back off his face. "Could you use some help?"

"I'd be thrilled."

"Later," Magdelene muttered and turned to face the gates. They were no longer in the best of condition. As she watched, they took a direct hit, trembled and crumbled into a line of smoking ash.

A screaming horde of demons advanced through the opening and came to a complete halt.

"Oh, shit," said one.

A less articulate demon stomped taloned feet, gouging great chunks out of the flagstones, and flung a serrated battle axe in Magdelene's direction. Whistling obscenely, the axe made a complete three-hundred-sixty-degree turn and would have bisected the thrower had its shape allowed for two equal halves. As it was, the larger of the two pieces took out one of its smaller brethren as it fell.

Those at the front of the horde suddenly decided they'd rather be at the rear.

When the carnage died down and self-inflicted wounds were being licked, a green-scaled, ivory-horned demon, enough like Kali to be her twin, called out. "We heard you lost your power!"

"You heard wrong."

"But we have been observing you! You have used no power since you came from here!"

"So?"

"So, you . . ." Ruby-red eyes widened and the demon's tone grew peeved. "It's a trap!"

Magdelene smiled. "Of course it is. You know how I hate to exert myself."

"That's not fair!"

"Oh, for pity's sake, you're a demon. What do you know about fair?"

"Good point," the demon acknowledged.

The ground erupted under Magdelene's feet. Half a dozen tentacles with claw-edged suckers whipped around legs and arms and body, tightened, turned white, and flaked apart as Magdelene stepped out of their hold. The battle that followed didn't last long. When over half the horde had been destroyed, lowering the odds to barely fifty to one, the remaining demons voluntarily disappeared.

"Demons," Magdelene explained, to the silent semicircle of black-robed wizards she found watching her when she turned, "may enjoy nothing more than wholesale slaughter but they aren't actually stupid. Self-preservation almost always wins out over bloodlust."

"But why a trap?" Micholai asked.

"A demon exists only to gain power and status. While destruction of a wizard raises both, it comes with a risk. Demons don't like risk. In order to get his troops to assault *me*, Kan Kon had to lead them himself. You know what happened. This place has probably been under discussion of assault for some time. . . ."

"But why the trap?" Micholai insisted.

"I'm getting to that." She wiped a bit of ichor off a block of stone that had been blasted out of the wall and sat down, ignoring the decomposing demon feet sticking out from underneath. "The council wouldn't listen when I explained they were in danger. If things continued the way they were, sooner or later, one of the de-

mon princes would've decided that the potential gain from so many wizards in one place outweighed the risk. As he wouldn't want me to get involved, he'd probably goad one of his brothers into keeping me busy long enough to destroy this place and gain its power. Which"—she looked around and shook her head—"wouldn't have taken long, as the odds changed rather drastically in demonic favor when the council served themselves up on a platter."

"So you let them think you'd been removed already," Micholai began to pace. "Essentially, you made them attack on your terms."

"Essentially," Magdelene agreed. "And if the council had just stayed inside the walls it would have been a perfect plan and no one would've gotten hurt." She scratched at a sucker mark on the back of one calf and sighed. "Boy, am I hungry. I could really go for a plate of Kali's calamari about now."

"Look! Look what I found!" An apprentice, no more than twelve, came running through the ruins of the gate holding Gillian's massive crystal in both hands.

The assembled wizards stared at the huge stone. All but two lifted right hands to clutch the smaller crystals hanging around their own throats. No one spoke.

"Give it to me," Magdelene said at last.

As no one protested, the apprentice solemnly stepped forward and laid the crystal—worn for two hundred and fifty years by the head of the Council of Wizards—on Magdelene's outstretched hand.

Magdelene tightened her fingers.

The crystal shattered into purple dust.

Eyes dancing, Magdelene blew the dust off her palm. For a moment the breezes were purple, and then the dust began to settle.

A pair of purple pigeons looked significantly unimpressed but the small flock of ravens, violet highlights gleaming in the sun, continued to feed uncaring on scattered piles of lavender entrails.

Micholai rolled his eyes. "Magdelene . . ."

"With great power," Magdelene interrupted, "comes great responsibility." She stuck out a purple tongue. "But no one ever said that we weren't allowed to have a good time." Then she disappeared.

Only to reappear a moment later, swooping out of the ruins of the tower and down into the courtyard.

"Well?" the most powerful wizard in the world asked, hovering a foot or so above the ground and offering Micholai her best smile. "You coming?"

Micholai started to protest, shrugged, grinned, and climbed cautiously aboard.

The carpet rose straight up and the last anyone heard, as a black wool robe drifted slowly down from the clouds, was a strangled, "Magdelene! We're going to fall off!" ♦

# Metal Fatigue



## Kathe Koja

Dust. Above a party store, LIQUOR, LOTTO, keno machines fed by the poorest of the poor with coins rattled black by pocket tumbling, machine sounds nervous as a nervous cough. Grit-rimmed eyes, grit beneath her nails like powdered bone, fresh solder burn on her inner wrist a party-red, still too sore even to bandage. Dirt like sugar between her teeth.

Already dark, and she thought about going downstairs, scraping change for a sandwich, a bottled drink maybe. She had been working all day, sweaty and burned, heavy pants stuck ragged to the backs of her legs. On the worktable the sculpture's long arms lay maddening in static; beautiful; what difference did that make? Her arms were long, too, knotty with muscle, throwing metal around had made her strong. Now away from the table to stretch, bending awkward to tug at her body, a little Oh of pain when a joint pulled wrong; stretching harder.

The whole room was less than three meters wide, absurdly long from door to fencing wall: floor scraped to splinters past the overlay of her workspace, hemmed by the inscrutable orange wall of the welding panels oblique as any antique screen. Near the worktable a green metal rack, half-drawered, hung deft

Illustration by Rick Lieder

From the book *SKIN*. Copyright ©1993 Kathe Koja. Reprinted with permission of Delacorte Press, an imprint of Dell Publishing, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.



and messy with tools, cables, filter masks, welding helmet and goggles; forming a bandy L, a battered couch-bed, table with cooking tools, an empty sink. In the farthest corner wavy green plastic, chest-high to partially shield a toilet and stand-up shower box reminiscent of a Porta-John, with the same faint chemical flavor; stripping as she crossed the room, into the instant sting, leaving it cold to soothe her burned wrist, faint pepper of burns across her cheek.

Strings of wet hair in her eyes, towel bright as her burn; someone had stolen it for her, hotel name stenciled into the heavy fabric. A rich person's towel. The case-window windows were chicken-wired but she had found a way to open them; no breeze tonight, somebody's radio harsh with distortion. Drunk laughter, a girl, somebody else saying, "Squeeze me, chita, come on," as if the act might be completed there in the street; the girl laughed again, the glossy humor of denial.

Long legs stepping into cotton pants torn off at the knees, thin T-shirt and hair scooped heavy into a wet topknot tied with a jaunty twist of speaker wire. Scuffed steel-toed ankle boots thick on the risers, kicking gently at the paint-kissed door separating the stairs from the party store's entrance, where the manager was now counting half-smashed cartons of cigarettes.

"Hey, Tess," coolly, still counting. Still mad about the smoke, probably; her complaints were getting more frequent. Tess moved past her into the dirty warren of the store, everything leaky or cheap or plastic, half-crushed boxes and dusty greeting cards, keno machines loud and blurry and two white guys in black T-shirts ceaselessly pumping quarters. Half a liter of white grape juice, cool in her hand, a box of crackers, two handfuls of change and the girl behind the counter scowled, big hair, big fake earrings shiny with scratched gold.

"Why'n't you try paying with real money?"

"Want me to count it for you?"

A deeper scowl, scraping it across the counter into her hand. "Bitch," but already Tess had turned, past hearing and up the stairs again to sit in the circle of white, juice and crackers and new sweat already trickling down her forehead before the moveless sculpture lying in its trench of spatter and shine.

Showering again, spurts and gurgles of unpredictable heat, she had slept for less than four hours and felt it. Today was her day for the scrapyard, jagged landscape and you needed those steel-toed shoes, sturdy beggar with a heavy bag, reinforced canvas and sometimes it ripped anyway. Her sunglasses hung on a black vinyl string around her long neck; she put them on as soon as she got outside, almost ninety and not even noon.

She had no car now, had sold it to get breathing room on the rent, missed it more each trip to the scrapyard—small harvests, without a car—and now not much room left to breathe, either; she would be out of money soon, out on the street maybe, or maybe her piece would sell at the show: THE ART OF STEEL. What a joke. Five guys with dayjobs and two professors, metals used as just another tool in the larger service of introducing one's name

to the art journals, *New Art Quarterly*, *Art NOW*. Need-less angles, curlicues and avant bobbing birdfeeders, the ones who thought a jagged weld made the whole piece gritty; as if to name it real would make it so. Worst of all no one did their own work, their own welds, she had asked enough questions to get sure. She was the only woman in the show: maybe they were getting state money and had to let her in. Tonight was the opening. She did not want to go but would, for the food, and to see if, maybe, maybe, somebody would buy her piece. Which was ridiculous. Empty bag against her shoulder like a flopping flap of skin, skirting the back of a moving bus, halo of fumes. Dry eyes burning behind her sunglasses, dark as welder's goggles.

The scrapyard was not far but seemed so. Burn on her wrist chafed by the too-tight bandage, the manager in the mood to charge double and said so. On the counter was a disassembled eight-gauge nibbler, the parts runny, frozen like cooled lava. "I can fix that for you," Tess said. "Got a glue gun?"

"You got half an hour," the manager said. "That's it."

Landscape of iron and rusty teeth pointing at the sun, she climbed carefully, doubting each step; tetanus shots were expensive. Once she had tumbled through an unstable pile, incongruous whoop of surprise as something grabbed, ripped, tore; she still had the marks on her right arm, long spiderweb scarring thin as machine lace. —Here a flotsam of something black, very much like the nibbler but webbed in sagging cable and the blistered strips of some heavy plastic casing; it was nothing she recognized but she took it anyway, its heft was good in her hand. Beyond that the false glitter of chrome, a fan crippled bladeless, she left it for a sullen slick of unwarped plastic that looked good from a distance but turned out to be nothing. Step and bend, step and bend, the red dirt of rust on her fraying work gloves, sun on her head and the back of her neck, burning, burning. Step and bend. She was there for over an hour before a guy on a hi-lo hollered her down and back to the office, where she haggled for her finds, paying more than she meant to for the nibbler-thing; its weight in the canvas bag banging hard against her hip, long legs in long strides, eyes big and dark and busy behind the black sunglasses: scanning the street, discards, you never knew where you might find something good.

Even the stairs were an oven, going up. As soon as she got inside she pulled off her T-shirt, gray with sweat, tossed it to the couchbed to maybe dry, then changed her mind and took it into the shower with her. The shower was her one luxury, the only thing free and now in its cold drench she felt her sunburned neck, the ache of her wrist gentle down, her nipples grow pleasantly hard. She was almost out of soap so was careful with the sli-ver, small and pink like an animal's tongue, faint smell of flowers that would never grow here. It was nearly two; time to get to work.

Almost at once she saw she had been right about the nibbler-thing: its ruined cables hung like seaweed about the blistered arms of her sculpture, its warped shaft the piece's new throat. Faulty heat gun to melt a pink scum

of bubblepack across the shaft; thinnest leaves of solder where the skin would be.

The opening was at seven; she worked till six, cleaned up, chose clothes from the zipperless husk of a three-suitier hung from the gibbet of a railroad nail: short black pants, long black T-shirt, the soiled white of her bandage bright as found jewelry against her skin. Sandals instead of steel-toes. She let her hair hang, coarse, long, half-auburn and half-brown, it was beautiful hair and she knew it and she wore it the way another woman would have worn a favorite dress. Snapping the elastic keyring on her unburned wrist, slamming the door on heat to more heat, sweat on her upper lip, on the pale ridge of skin behind the bridge of her sunglasses. On the bus two boys tried to pick her up, cute boys, ten years too young for her. She joked with them a little until they got off, watched with half a smile their brisk extravagant postures, hips cocked big-man as the bus pulled away.

The opening was crowded, Gallery Isis, hieroglyphic entryway in overdone reds and golds. Big plastic letters made to look like iron; pig iron; THE ART OF STEEL. She had to pass all the pieces to get to the food table, pass the two professors and the five guys with dayjobs, none of whom noticed or spoke to her. She already knew where they had placed her work, one piece in a corner, poorly lit, she had argued about it for most of an afternoon before abruptly giving in.

Mineral water and cut-up lemons, lots of rye bread squares and little cheeses sliced into shapes. One was dark and sharp and tasted like liquor, loose and heavy in her mouth; she spit it into the tiny red fanfolded napkin, balled it up in her hand and kept it there as the gallery director paused in passing: chunky jewelry, heavy brown lipstick on a thin white smile.

"Isn't it a terrific show?"

She said nothing. The spit-out cheese had begun to soak through the napkin, touch her skin like the moisture from a leaking boil. Let's shake on it.

"I think your pieces look wonderful."

"I only have one." Pointing with the napkin hand.

"There in the corner." It was one of her best, too, *Archangel*, and how she had struggled to transmit the sense of motion: wings like knives, the churn of flayed metal sheet stock, the mouth all teeth like God's own engine come back to earth to burn. The teeth alone had taken a week. She wasn't asking much for it, much less after the gallery's cut; in the end it would probably work out to a dollar an hour, but if you calculated things that way, why bother? You did it to do it. Everything else was extraneous.

"—and Matty Regal, too." The director was talking, apparently had been. "So we're very pleased with that as well."

Her mouth still tasted sour from the cheese. "Excuse me," and stepped away, back to the food table, more flat mineral water that she drank as if she were dehydrated, three plastic cups one after the other. After she had eaten as much bread and cheese as she could stand she left, through chatter and wine and the shine of fake gold bolts and nuts beneath aimed light less bright than

her spartan circle, talk so cheap a week's worth would pay her rent for a year; and the heavy glass door with its gold-stenciled icons closing silent on its own behind her, night and heat and work safe on her side.

She still had an answering machine; sometimes people wanted her for pickup jobs, missing a call might mean missing half a month's rent. Tonight there was a message, some guy, Crane somebody. Want to talk to you, maybe I'll see you at the opening. He didn't sound like anybody who would want to buy anything from her, but you never knew.

Back into work clothes, sweaty-hot but being burned was hotter and took longer to go away. She remembered her real school, welding school: truck bodies and they had let her watch, they thought she was cute or something, had not driven her away. Hot, always, and the big ventilators going on and on and on, the endless revolution of blades big as bodies, rod and arc and the fountain shine like stars ground to pieces, the endless eclipse one must not watch. Fascinated, silent, in roll-down pants and her hair skinned back, baseball cap and wanting to make the fire, make the metal run; she had never gotten over it, the idea of liquid metal. She remembered the smell of scorched clothing, heavy coveralls burned straight through, everything seen through the underwater gloss of welder's goggles, the helmets most exotic: round-headed spacemen with flat square eyes, the world's most faceless mask. She had seen men—it was all men, only men—hurt, burned, once she saw a man drop the fluxless tail end of his welding rod into his low-cut shoe: hideous and funny his screaming dance; he had danced her into taped-up pantlegs as an article of faith. Liquid metal and so much to learn, and then the shop closed down, moved to larger quarters where the only access was through an air-conditioned office with a big red OSHA notice taken as lawsuit gospel; no trespassers at all.

So. Get your own gear, melt your own metal. No one would hire her, the welding shops she applied to thought she was hilarious, so: fast food, and to speed it up she started barmaid moonlighting, still underage but nobody cared since she didn't drink. After a month she quit the dayjob, worked all the hours no one wanted: saving, saving, busy as a little beaver, wise little underage ant. In a few months she had enough for a welding-cutting outfit and the space in which to use it. Another three months' worth bought her time.

First embarrassing works but she got that out of the way fast, quick study, learning that what she made could be called sculpture, actual art. You could apply for grants, too, but to Tess taking somebody else's money was just carte blanche for taking their shit, too, and she got enough shit as it was, nobody wanted a welding shop on the premises, even in the places she could afford. So. A year here, there, cinderblock storefronts getting shabbier all the time, earning the rent at pickup jobs: they quit laughing when they saw she had her own gear, but still she wasn't certified so no real-money jobs, no municipalities or building tanks for her. Just keep moving, further down the food chain, all the way to this shithouse

where Grace downstairs was so greedy she would rent to anybody. Even a welder. She was probably hoping Tess would burn the whole place down one day so she could claim the insurance and leave town. No such luck; there was too much work to do.

This piece, now, was reaching completion, with the addition of the nibbler parts. Little left, but *something*, not sure what but she would know when she found it. In the green metal rack was a dishpan jumbled sharp with small parts. Picking through it with the care of a carrion crow, big anonymous bolts skinned with grease, a broken baffle for an old heat gun, the springless trigger from something, a thin strip of Lexan the width of a bookmark. A blindfold. Holding it like a microscope slide, she placed it before the sculpture's headless neck, a little higher. Higher. There. Not a smile but an inward nod: now how to hold it?

Hot in the white light, and downstairs the tingling chitter that meant a payoff on the keno machines, some guy yelling "Yes! Yes!" over and over again. Careful crack of last night's empty juice bottle, slivering the glass to insert three slim splinters into the Lexan, just where a mouth might be. Her burn ached less. Sweat under her breasts, salt in her mouth. Solder on the floor, a cooling drop that spread unnoticed like silver rain and dried at last to the unseen thickness of a tear.

On her way downstairs to buy breakfast and on the phone, Crane; picking up while he was in the middle of his message, "Hello, yeah, I'm here."

"I called yesterday." He sounded like he had a cold, a wet cold. "I want to come by and see you."

Silence. She didn't like people in her workspace. Finally, "How about I meet you somewhere?"

"No, I need to see you in your workshop." Workshop; Santa's littlest metal-grubbing elf. "I'm a sculptor too—you've probably seen some of my work. Crane Kenning, I do aluminum constructs, I just had a show at the Gerry Hilbin last—"

"Right. Listen, I don't do much aluminum, just steel and iron, I don't know if—"

"I'm sure you can help me, I mean the differences are not that great."

Asshole. "Look, I'm really busy today."

"How about tonight then?" and he talked her finally into a place from which she could not escape without great rudeness; he would be brief, he promised, though sounding somewhat aggrieved that he need promise this at all. Brief and succinct and maybe she could learn something from his methods, too. She hung up angry at herself, clomped downstairs to the street, to another and what called itself a farmer's market but was more like a jumped-up fruit stand; Tess bought two oranges, the luxury of a peach, and stole a handful of cherries when no one was looking, chewed them stones and all as she paid then spit the stones and stems on a straggly stand of weedy grass. The rest she carried home, sat outside just past the party-store door to dissect with her thumb one orange, careful of the juice. Two women started pushing over who would board a bus first. A passing

radio advised that temperatures would be a little cooler today, lows tonight in the seventies. Hurray. Her hair was sticking to the back of her neck. She sucked the orange thoroughly, down to chewy rind, the other orange between her knees, the peach beside her on the pavement like the firm and thoughtful heart of a liberated beast. Across the street one teenager yelled "Suck me!" at another; Tess licked her fingers slowly and as slowly went inside.

Crane was six feet tall and all in black, steel-rimmed glasses with tinted lenses round as the little juice bottles she bought downstairs. He started talking as soon as the door opened and worse yet had not come alone: a woman with him, behind him, hanging a little back in the hall but not shy; waiting. Waiting, Tess saw, for her and not Crane to say it was okay.

"Come on in," she said, and the woman stepped forward, past Crane; not quite as tall as him, not quite as tall as Tess: younger but more muscled, athlete's legs, or dancer's, smooth bare skin like Teflon over steel. Her handshake was very strong but she did not squeeze the way a man might.

"I'm Bibi Bloss," she said.

Foxface bones, pale bright hair and eyes the same: incandescent, less broken glass than the sheer act of breaking. When she smiled Tess saw her teeth were very small, milk teeth, strange childish grin.

"You do all your own welding, don't you?" Crane was looking around the room, moving to the pieces she had pushed in a corner, sculpture forestry about his legs and waist. "This one's kind of interesting," he said, careless hand above the razored ribs of *Mater Intrinsicus*, fierce her crown of sheared bearings and Tess pushed his hand brusquely away.

"That's really sharp," she said. "Listen, why don't you tell me what you need."

"Fine," he said. "I don't even know if you can help me at all. What I need primarily," and Bibi now to where the toilet was, the green wall of the shower, moving as if through a particular silence of which no one but she was aware, "is information. I have a special piece in mind," and off on some weird impossible tangent, he worked with aluminum, he should know better. Maybe he didn't. She tried to explain why there was no doing what he wanted to do but he wasn't listening, he was talking about layers of metal mimicking layers of meaning, talking about metallurgy as metaphor and the intrinsic *barbarism* of iron in such a way that she felt like striking an arc off his steel-rimmed glasses; and looking past him to see Bibi beside another piece, *Dolores Regina* and her fingers loose and deft on half-deliberate spatter, the flat fillet weld, streetlight from behind less halo than warning light and chicken-wire shadows on her face like the solemn etching of tattoo. Standing there she was sculpture, strong iron bones and solder muscles, the tilt of her head a construct so subtle that Tess stared, the flat appraising stare of the scrapyard as with the grace of gears meeting Bibi's head turned, to watch Tess watching her.

Crane just noise in the background now and Bibi's gaze calm and calmly thorough, Tess and the room and the sculpture both harbored, everything plain to those eyes. Tess still as metal in her own silence and Crane finishing up, so what did she think? How long would it take to do?

Shaking her head, can't be done and his irritation immediate, "Why not? It seems easy enough to me."

Then go do it, asshole. "Look, all I can tell you is I can't do it. All right?"

"Well, then," a busy man in pursuit of his art, "can you recommend anybody? I have to get—"

From across the room, still in that posture: "Tess. Why haven't I seen your stuff before?"

Glance down, reluctant now to meet those eyes straight on. "I don't show much."

"Why not?" Nodding inclusion, the sculpture, the worktable. "It's brilliant work. Don't you have an agent or anything? Are you represented by a gallery?"

Tess's smile involuntary, and Crane again, excluded and annoyed, "She's showing right now at the Isis," and again Bibi ignored him, or rather accepted the information as if it had dropped like a pearl from the bodiless air: "The Isis? You don't belong there."

"I don't belong anywhere," and wondering as she said it why she had, it sounded so sophomoric, so mockingly proud. "I just, I don't really show much."

"Listen," Crane louder, dragging back attention, one hand full of keys impatient, "can you help me or not?"

"No. I can't."

Before his answer, Bibi's smile: "Thanks," as if it had been on her errand they had come. "I'll see you." And gone that moment, out the door and Crane pausing to watch as she did Bibi's silhouette, one long stepping muscle in tension and his irony, "Well *thanks*," and graceless down the stairs. Tess watched for a moment longer, to see if she would come back. Nothing. Closing the door, slowly, strange strange eyes and then forgetting it all in the turn and step, back to the workspace and taking up her mask, flipping the grounded switch to start the final burn.

Sleeping in to wake sweaty and muscle-sore: the piece was done. Scrap steel and Lexan, glass and the warped plastic throat, it was better than she had expected though still not where she wanted to be; where was that? who knew? She would know when she got there. Still the piece was good: textures all a-mesh and it almost seemed to move, to twitch when not watched, calm semblance of silence in the moment of attention. Smiling a little to think of it creeping loose around the room, trying the windows, trying the door, peering eyeless to clear its plastic throat; dry in self-mockery: anthropomorphizing; watch it. She knew people, artists, who liked to gurgles about their "babies," their "children": "Every one of my pieces is a child of mine," who had said that to her? Horseshit. Children were children and work was work and people were assholes when they started believing their own arty bullshit. They should all work with metal, get burned once in a while: keep them grounded.

In the shower, the last of the soap in her eyes and

somebody knocking, not banging but hard, Tess heard it plainly over the water. Determined. "*Shit*," hissed between her teeth, eyes burning. Loud: "Who is it?"

Indistinct.

"Who is it?"

"Bibi Bloss."

Dripping on a T-shirt, the towel around her head, shooting back the dead bolt: "Come on in."

Alone, smile and ripped leggings, slipping off her black sunglasses to hook them in the stretched neck of her T-shirt. "Hi," closing the door. "If this isn't a good time, please say so."

"No, it's okay." Stringy wet bangs, dripping onto her cheekbones. Crane's errand? or her own?

Unerring toward the worktable, she had little feet, Bibi, bony ankles above disintegrating sneakers, she cocked her head like a listening animal and said nothing at all. Examining the new piece for literal minutes, a long time to stand staring but her eyes were busy as a bird's, she left nothing out. Finally: "It's ready to move, isn't it," not a question and Tess nodded, pleased with more than the pleasure of surprise.

Glancing at the metal rack, tools still in last night's orderly scatter; sun through the chicken wire, endless burn holes and dust. "Tess. Why do you live here?"

Surprised, "It's cheap. Why?"

"I just wondered." There was definitely more to it than that but no more was coming now. Silence; Bibi's dirty finger on the piece's throat.

"What?" wiping at her wet neck, water in her eyes. She felt no footing here, was unsure what to say until she did. Bibi saw, or seemed to; seemed to understand because she nodded, once and brisk.

"I know; what do I want. Listen, today I made a pilgrimage to that creepy Isis Gallery. —Without Crane, incidentally, who's back at his place with two other guys trying to figure out what you told him last night."

"Doesn't he do his own welding?"

"Crane doesn't know shit about welding. Why else do you think he came to you?" A pause. "I'm glad I came with him."

It sounded rude; she said it anyway. "Why?"

"Because of your work." Full stare, her eyes washed marble light and fingers unconscious on the piece before her. "I wanted to talk to you last night, but not in front of Crane. You must have noticed he's a size-eleven asshole, once he gets started you can't shut him up. And besides, it's none of his business."

"Are you, is he you—"

"I used to live with him, if that's what you're asking. He's part-time in a dance group I'm in—he's a much better dancer than he is a sculptor. Which isn't saying a whole hell of a lot," and that strange little grin again, dry as the curve of a bone. "No, what's mostly wrong with Crane is that he doesn't have anything I want."

Tess smiled, as much in surprise as discomfort; at least she was honest. "Do I?"

"Yes. I want to see all your stuff."

"Why?"

"Show me," shark's grin, "and I'll tell you." ♦

# Dark Glass

Steve Gross  
and  
Sasha Miller

"Now," History-Technician Randel said.

Life-Technician Bennon extended the stasis bubble around the team to include the hospital bed and the man who lay there, paralyzed, his breathing heavy and labored. As the life-tech attached the leads to the man's head, Randel had to swallow a lump in his throat. *No matter how often I work a Time Transfer and Retrieval, he thought, I'll never get used to it.* But then, TTR Team Blue had never had the budget to let him have that much practice. Maybe winning this upcoming exercise would remedy that at last.

"Embolism has nearly reached the lungs." Dachis, the team medi-tech, ran another scan across the dying man's



Illustration by Kent Bash

body. "Transfer envelope of opportunity open. If we get him now, we won't be cutting him off from more than a second or two of real life."

"If you can call these last twelve days of his real life." Randal sighed. Retrieval effectively killed its subject, so every TTR team was careful about the exact moment of death. Not too early, and certainly not too late, which was worse than slicing the subject's lifespan because they had only one chance to get it right. He checked the TR chronometer. "1749 hours, 21 December 1945. Right on the button. They'll chart it as 1745 hours."

Outside in the hall, the second hand on the clock ticked. The sound waves, slowed by the stasis field to subsonic level, made Randal's teeth hurt.

"Cy-body ready back at base," Bennon said.

Randal glanced at the nurse hovering at the patient's bedside so close that Bennon had had to work to keep her out of the bubble. Her name tag identified her as Lt. Randell, R. N. Curious coincidence, her name. Nurse Randell had sent a colleague hurrying to fetch the man's wife. She wouldn't arrive in time.

"Transfer subject ready," Dachis said. "Transfer now." He grinned. "Hit the record button, bud-o."

Old joke, old and tired. Randal activated the transfer sequence, and the man's face began to sag. Before the second hand outside could tick again—within an hour subjective time and fast even for a TR team—the histi-tech had his subject's main personality imprint downloaded, transferred, and stored in the cy-body's memory bubble. Randal imagined a little heightened color coming into the cy-body's cheeks back at the Habitat as the personality loaded in. As a precaution, he recorded a backup bubble as well, heretimer.

"That it?" Bennon said. "Clear?"

Randal rechecked his readouts; all systems indicated a good transfer, though nothing would be certain until the patient woke up hundreds of years from now up-time. "All clear."

"Stasis field collapsing, subjective and objective time lag closing."

Dachis ran another quick scan. "There it goes," he said. "The embolism just entered the lung. Get us out of here, *now*."

"How's he doing?" Randal asked the ward chief.

"The new Transfer?" Lyss laughed. "Can't you hear him? He's awake and alert and, to coin a phrase, cussing a blue streak. He's sent two shrinkers packing and none of the rest of the staff will go in until somebody can get him calmed down."

Randal listened, but the soundproofing allowed only a muffled echo of what was going on in the Transfer Recovery Room out into the corridor, certainly not enough to make out anything the patient was saying—or shouting. "I'll go see him. Who else is in there?"

"Director Stauchov."

Randal raised his eyebrows. Then the rumors had been correct; the new Transfer was a viper bigtime deluxe, or Stauchov wouldn't be involved. Randal paused long enough for the security scanner to take his retinal im-

age, and pushed the door open. The old man's high-pitched tirade spilled out into the hallway, and Randal hurriedly closed the door behind him.

"—goddamn fucked-up sonofabitch responsible, I'll fry his ass in olive oil and serve it to the dog! No, by God, Willie wouldn't touch it. Go tell this shit to the Russians. They're dumb enough to believe anything."

Stauchov made a futile, calming gesture. "Now, General, if you'll just calm down long enough to let me explain—"

"Head doctors? Psy-fucking-*chiatrists*?" Without missing a beat, the old soldier turned the force of his rage on Randal. "And who the hell're you?"

"H. T. Randal. I'm one of the fucked-up sonsabitches who brought you here, and if you'll shut the hell up long enough, you'll find out why." *What in the world*, Randal thought, appalled, *made me say a thing like that? And in front of the director, too. Now I've done it.*

To his surprise, the Transfer didn't go into a deeper rage but just stared at him. Then the man grinned, showing the famous cigar-stained teeth the construc-techs down in the lab had labored hard to duplicate. "Well, son," he said, "at least you've got the balls to stand up to me. Okay, I'll shut up. Talk."

"Maybe I could explain, General. . . ."

"I said *be* could talk. Not you. I've Stauchov. That's some kind of Russian name, isn't it?"

"My ancestors came from that area, yes."

"Thought so." The general turned back to Randal. "All right, son. You've got exactly two minutes before I begin kicking more ass, and I'm going to start with yours."

"We—my Transfer team and I—went back to that hospital room in Heidelberg and brought you up here."

The Transfer flexed his hands thoughtfully. "Just after the crash I asked Hay Gap to work my fingers for me. Couldn't move 'em. Had a goddamn broken neck, they said. How'd you manage to fix it?"

"We didn't, not exactly. We just gave you a new body. It's a kind of living machine. A lot better than your old one."

"Hmm. You got one of these, these living machines, too?"

Randal laughed. "No, sir. Cy-bodies are reserved for vipers."

"What the hell's a goddamn viper?"

"VIP. Viper."

"Oh, yeah." The Transfer looked at Randal keenly. "You referred to going back, and bringing me here. This sure as hell isn't an Army hospital."

"Going back refers to backtime. Hmm. Well, to put it simply, we time-traveled and kidnapped you, just before you died. Hope that isn't too big a shock."

The general digested this in silence. Then he began to chuckle. "Well, by God!" he said. "And there I thought I was going out like some kind of puking infant. I *knew* God wasn't going to let me die like that! Shock? Hell, no! It's another lifetime, another chance! Just like all the ones before! Hell, I'd just barely got my four stars when I had to cash it in last time. Think you can arrange one or two more this time around?"



Events were progressing a little rapidly for Director Stauchov. "Now, General, you need to rest—"

The old soldier climbed out of the bed and snapped to attention, obviously pleased at how well the new artificial body responded. He faced Stauchov and executed a textbook salute. "I'll rest, I'll sleep, I'll sing and dance and whistle Dixie out my ass if that's what you want from me, I'm so grateful God wasn't through with me yet. General George Smith Patton, Jr., reporting for duty, *sir!*"

"How old are you, General?" Randel settled back in his chair, working hard to maintain eye contact with the older man. Because of his early success with Patton, the history technician had been assigned to Transfer Orientation. At times, such as now, Randel doubted the wisdom of such an assignment. Despite the intensive hypnosis he'd had on the Transfer's history plus the guidance the shrinkers were now giving him, he was getting nowhere with Patton.

"Old?" The general snorted in derision. "Hell, I'm *old!* That's how old I am. I thought I'd wear out long before this. You know everything. Look it up in that goddamn electrical notebook of yours."

"The records say you were—I mean, *are*—sixty. That's not old, not heretime at least. I just thought if we could talk, we could—"

"Cut the crap. You people must have had a use for me or you wouldn't have snatched me out of that hospital room in Heidelberg—oh, yes, you don't need to look so goddamn innocent. I have ears and that Lyss, the nurse, whatever her name is, is mighty pretty and she likes to talk, even if it is mostly this new-fangled lingo—how many centuries did you say it was?"

"Here at Retrieval Center we try to use 20th-century and earlier speech patterns, at least until our Transfers get used to the time-shift. It's been . . . oh, call it a couple of hundred years." Despite the old man's obvious toughness and the ease with which he had accepted his continuation, there was no sense in shocking Patton unnecessarily by getting too specific. Some Transfers had been unable to handle this information and required extensive work with the shrinkers to salvage them.

"Well, you're piss-poor with your goddamn speech patterns. Can't understand people half the time. Couple of centuries. That long, eh?"

For once, Randel seemed to have Patton's attention. "I, er, understand you believe you lived several times before this," he said cautiously.

"Hell, yes." Patton's face softened and he smiled. "Even wrote a poem about it. 'Through A Glass, Darkly.' You're bound to have it there in your notes."

They sat in a reconstructed 20th-century room furnished with comfortable chairs, tables and lamps, a rug, and a case filled with the standard assortment of hard-copy books plus a few carefully selected volumes on military history. A small two-way viddie screen occupied most of one wall. Randel had to admit that, anachronistic as it was, the room was quite cozy and inviting. He did a quick search in the old-fashioned notebook computer he was careful to use in the general's presence,

and located the item in question. "Yes. I've read it several times." He turned the notebook so Patton could read the screen. "I notice that you believe you started out a foot soldier and progressed through the ranks during your various lifetimes."

"Yep. Every lifetime a little higher. This one ought to be a dilly. That's why I was interested in a couple more stars. . . ." Patton shifted in his chair, reaching for the cigar box on the table where they sat. Randel quietly activated the air purifier switch on his side of the table as the general lit the cigar and began puffing out clouds of blue smoke. "Damn. Taste buds just aren't the same in this new body. Might as well be smoking hay and manure as these Coronas."

Randel could also see no sense in telling him that he wasn't even smoking real tobacco. "We can do some fine-tuning. Just make a list."

"Okay. And shift my voice down an octave or two while you're at it. Always hated squeaking like a castrated choirboy. That movie fellow sounded okay. I liked that." Patton leaned back in his chair and smiled. "But that's not what you're here for, is it?"

Randel shook his head.

"You want to know why I've been acting like such a bastard these last few days?"

"As a matter of fact, I'd be grateful."

The general laughed harshly. "I'll bet they've got your balls in a vise. Get the old sonofabitch to cooperate or you're out on your ass in the cold, right?"

"Something like that. I thought it might be Director Stauchov—his, er, ancestry."

"Stauchov? Oh, hell, he isn't the problem. Interesting what happened to the USSR. I thought we'd sure as hell have to kick their Russian asses back to Moscow." His eyes twinkled. "I've been catching up on my reading."

"So I see," Randel said with a smile. The shrinkers had been keeping close tabs on Patton through the viddie, noting that he had begun writing with the archaic instruments and paper provided him in one of the desk drawers, and also experimenting with the notebook computer, picking up the word processing program amazingly quickly though he typed hunt-and-peck. His spelling, true to the history Randel had had hypno-imprinted, was truly atrocious, and the general seemed to take great pleasure in running the spelling checker. "We thought you might appreciate the information."

"You people saved my life when I was dying, and you had to have done it for a reason. And that's why I've been acting like such a first-class bastard. It's driving me crazy, not knowing what you want me for! I'm a man of few and limited abilities, but waging war is what I'm good at. You fellows got a war on you need me to manage for you?"

"Something like that."

"Well, hell, man, get on with it! I'll need a few more books so I can catch up on the latest tactical methods. That fellow Schwarzkopf, for example, in Desert Storm. The way he deployed his forces. Held 'em by the nose and kicked 'em in the ass. Brilliant, just brilliant. Must have studied me when he was in school."

"We've got Schwarzkopf. That is, the Red Team does." Randel could have bitten his tongue out. Patton's reaction, not what he expected, was nevertheless typical for the man.

"Good! I want him on my staff. And while you're at it, get me Lucius Prescott and Archie Roosevelt—be sure and keep him away from the booze—and Cod, that's Colonel Charles Codman, best aide I ever had, and—"

"We can't."

The general turned the full force of his displeasure on Randel. "And why the fuck not?" he said. His dangerously calm manner sent a clear signal that Randel was in great peril if he didn't choose his next words with care.

"Budget, sir. Not enough money. We get one person per crisis area, per team. You're it for World War Two."

Patton's eyes glittered and his voice took on a silky tone. "I believe you said something earlier, History-Technician Randel, about a Red Team. Am I to understand that this is something different from the Time Transfer and Retrieval team that picked me up? Oh, yes, you don't need to look so surprised. As I said, I've been doing some reading. I also listen as well as talk. I'm waiting for an answer."

"We—that is, my TTR group is Blue Team."

"Well, surely, Mr. Randel, between a Red Team and a Blue Team you managed to snare *somebody* I am used to working with."

"Doesn't exactly work that way."

"Ah. They have theirs, and you have yours, is that it? Yes. Well, who the hell else did Red Team get?"

"From your era, General Eisenhower, sir."

To Randel's surprise, Patton began to laugh. "That sanctimonious, paper-pushing, Limey-loving sonofabitch! Hell, he couldn't fight his way out of a piss-soaked paper sack! Never led men in combat in his life and, if the books I've been reading are right, slept through his eight years as president! You got 'em beat, son, I can tell you that. I have to have a staff, though."

Randel brightened. "You do, sir. We're bringing back people from major conflicts all through American history, right up to world pacification. So far, from the Revolutionary War we have General Wayne—"

"Mad Anthony Wayne? Crazy as hell, but a fighter."

"We have Sherman from the Civil War, Davy Crockett from the Alamo—"

"Crockett? Why in hell pick him? Buck Travis, now there's the fellow for strategy *and* tactics. Never lost a man for thirteen days under continual bombardment, did you know that? And led sorties out of the fort to play hell with the enemy troops. All Crockett ever was, was a damn good marksman with that long rifle of his."

Randel's face burned. "Uh, General, that's not exactly why we—that is, the upper Strategy and Tactics team—chose Crockett. Or why they chose you, for that matter."

"Naturally I'll want a say in who we get for the rest of my staff. . . ." Patton's animation subsided abruptly as the import of Randel's words sank in. "Then why *did* they choose me?" he said, eyes narrowed. "That's what I've been sitting on my ass in this high-falutin' whorehouse waiting to find out."

"It's your, well, I guess *charisma* would be a good word for it. Men will follow you, General. More to the point, they will die if you ask them to. That's what we need—men from history for Blue Morale Sector. And you to head it up."

Patton blinked several times. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Finally, he stubbed out the pseudo-cigar and took his time to light another. "Morale," he said through a haze of blue smoke.

"Yes, sir." Randel quickly called up the appropriate file on his notebook. Fortunately the shrinkers had anticipated this breakthrough, and he was prepared for it. "We are faced with an unprecedented exercise—I guess you'd call it a war—with, well, call them Outsiders. People from another world. We don't know when it's going to happen, but Planning says it's inevitable. Trouble is, we don't have anybody heretimer with any real experience."

"Textbook soldiers."

"Right, sir. We think we have a chance to win—"

"What's the war really about? Land expansion?"

"Something like that. Close enough. Let's say their world is in worse shape than ours was PPC—that's pre-pacification and cleanup."

"Yeah, I know. Fouled your own nest. So now these Outsider bastards think they can come in and take over, eh?"

"That's it. Information is pretty scarce but Surveillance and Intelligence says they consider us what you used to call 'easy pickings.'"

"Well, hell, they're wrong! God, but I'll enjoy teaching 'em different. Okay, I'll want S&I reports on everything—weapons, troop movements, whatever they've been able to pick up. Then I want a meeting with my staff—"

"Uh, sorry, General, but that won't be necessary. I mean, you can have a staff meeting, of course, but Morale doesn't get S&I reports."

Patton tensed, and the thunderstorm that had been brewing for some time began to erupt. His chair flew backward as he lunged to his feet, fists clenched. "Morale, hell! God-fucking-dammit, what you're talking about is *recruitment!* Speeches! Is that all you ball-less cocksuckers think I'm good for?" He laughed without humor. "You and Bradley. Last time around I got my ass in a sling every time I opened my goddamn mouth. Hell, boy, I'm a fighter and a fucking good strategist, too! Morale Section! Shit, I've done that. Sat around in England playing with myself and pretending to be an army when I should have been on the beach in France kicking ass and taking names. *Shit!* If I'd been there, Bradley would have got out of the Falaise Pocket in half the time it took him. Hell, Bradley used my planning to save his ass all through Europe until I quit telling him what to fucking do! Where the hell are my pistols? If you think I'm going to fucking stand around making *speeches* to mommas' boys to get them to fight without being a part of it you can go to fucking hell—"

Randel surreptitiously turned on his audio blinder. Patton's voice had gone so shrill it hurt his ears. "Yes, General, I understand, General, I'll pass along your sentiments, sir." He backed away, edging toward the door.

To his relief, the viddie tube flickered. Too long a response time, he thought. Somebody should have been back there, monitoring, all along.

Patton's face went blank. He teetered on his feet and the support-tech team rushed in to catch his cy-body before it fell and move it back to its bed before Patton's rage blew out all its circuits.

Randel watched the activity on the techie-floor below. Director Stauchov sat with him. "I hope they don't ruin him," Randel said worriedly.

"They know what they're doing."

"Patton suffered some head injuries in his youth, and they weren't treated properly. There's some evidence this condition contributed to the sort of temper outburst I witnessed. But in later life it just became part of his personality."

"So the shrinkers said. The techies are making a few minor adjustments so he won't meltdown the next time."

"Relieved to hear it. If he'd been in a live body, he might have had a seizure."

Stauchov smiled. "You've become surprisingly fond of the old man in a short time."

"He always had that effect on the people close to him. You either hated him or loved him, with no middle ground."

"Think he'll take the Morale assignment?"

"Hard to tell. I don't even want to think about Disconnecting him."

"Agreed." Stauchov frowned and picked at a loose thread on his suit. "That would leave Blue without anybody from the 1940's. I guess the next move would be the 60's but Westmoreland is definitely behind Patton when it comes to what we need."

"I thought Red already had Westmoreland."

"No, they got Mao."

"How about going earlier, getting Pershing?"

"He's third choice, behind Westmoreland. The histi-techs tell me he was a cold one, no fire to him. Thought you'd know that."

"My hypno-specialty was Patton."

"So it was. Well, looks like they've finished downstairs. Better get back to the Habitat. Your pet general will be waking up soon."

Patton appeared considerably subdued. "I apologize," he said. His voice was now lowered to a light baritone. "I acted like a horse's ass. It won't happen ever again."

Randel smiled. "I believe you've said something like that several times before—and then did it all over when the occasion seemed to call for it."

"I wasn't dealing with somebody who could literally pull my plug," Patton replied, grinning. "Lights out took on a whole new meaning. Now get serious with me, Randel. I want to know exactly where I stand. How badly does this Blue Team of yours need me for Morale Division?"

"Enough to spend—well, I guess it would translate as four or five billion of your 1945 dollars to bring you forward in time."

Patton whistled softly. "My God. I'm impressed. But why won't they let me do what I do best now that they've got me here?"

"You'd have to ask somebody else that question. I'm just following my programming—I mean, my orders."

"Right. And what happens if I don't cooperate?"

"I don't know, sir. Nobody has ever done that."

"Then let me be the first!" the general said triumphantly. He paused and glanced at Randel with a calculating look in his eye. "But Blue Team, now, that's a different story. You can't go back to the 1940's, can't even get that second-rater Sir Bernard Law Montgomery to la-de-dah fuck things up for you. In short, Blue Team has one hell of a lot to lose—including a private little contest they've got going with Red Team. Right?"

"You may be, sir." Randel shifted, uncomfortable and not knowing exactly how to proceed.

"Okay, who's in charge? I don't mean Stauchov, I mean Stauchov's boss. You get that sonofabitch in here to talk to me, whoever he is. We're going to by God get this thing straightened out, including who's *really* in charge. I didn't go through two world wars and get my ass nearly shot off in the first one to sit on it now that I've got the best second chance a mortal man has ever had in this world!"

"I'll—I'll talk to Director Stauchov for you, sir."

"That's a start. Dismissed!"

Director Stauchov, Patton and Randel sat around the conference table in Patton's habitat. Directly across from Patton was Bel Fannon, Over-Director of Blue Team. Patton appeared unfazed by having to deal with a woman in command. Stauchov was, however, definitely subdued and, taking his cue from the Director, Randel tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. He had the distinct impression that if he came to the attention of either of the two powerhouses seated opposite each other, he would be ground to powder between them.

Patton's voice had that silky quality Randel had learned to fear. "My dear Over-Director," he said, smiling, "I'm delighted to meet you at last. I understand you are responsible for choosing me for Blue Team to represent the World War II era."

Fannon nodded. "Yes, I am. Your reputation has survived the years."

Patton's smile faded. "Not all of it, I hope."

Fannon's eyes twinkled, and she brushed her upper lip with her finger. "All of it."

Patton cleared his throat. "Just so. Well, ma'am, since you went to all the trouble to bring me here, may I ask why you see fit to tie my hands behind my back rather than let me do what I came for?"

"And what would that be, General?"

"To defeat the enemy, ma'am!"

"We have people to do that, General."

Patton could not refrain from snorting. "With all due respect, Over-Director, what you have are theorists. Armchair warriors—what I used to call waffle-asses. What you need is a leader who has felt the sting of battle, who has led men in combat, who has—"

"And with all due respect, General, we are facing an enemy you do not know, armed with weapons beyond your—"

"Again, with all due respect, for years after Samson first picked up the jawbone of an ass no donkey dared bray. The wrestling adage 'There is a block for every hold' is equally applicable to war, as I have written. Each new weapon is mightily potent only until its block is devised. In my last life, ma'am, I can remember two inventions or possibly three which were supposed to stop war; namely, the dynamite cruiser *Vesuvius*, the submarine, and the tank. Yet, demonstrably, wars go blithely on and will still go on when your great-grandchildren are very old men." He paused, letting the silence build. "Assuming you survive this one, that is."

"We haven't had a war here on Earth for a century and a half."

"Madam, you make my point. If you've had no war, how can you say you have leaders who know how to win?" Patton chuckled deep in his throat. "You're out of practice. Wars, my dear, are fought by men using weapons, not by weapons using men. It is the fighting spirit of the men who face the enemy eye-to-eye and the man who leads them that gains victory."

"And you believe that yours is that spirit?"

"I know so, madam! And so do you. Otherwise, you would not have brought me from the very brink of death to this great and unknown future. For God's sake, give me a chance to prove it. If I fail, you have lost nothing—nothing that you would not have already lost, that is. If I succeed, you have won everything and perhaps saved your civilization. *L'audace, madame. Toujours, l'audace!*"

"You can be very convincing when you want to be, General. Nevertheless—"

"Who is the, er, Morale Division leader for Red Team?" Patton asked suddenly.

Fannon appeared startled by the question. "Why, I am not quite certain of that, General. But I believe President Eisenhower is on the short list."

Patton laughed. "Already your Red Team competitors have committed a strategic blunder. They have confused military and political leadership. I am not saying Ike was a good politician but, even as a general, he *was* a politician—and the mixture does not necessarily make good military leaders. In fact, history shows that most politicians make piss-poor battlefield commanders, just as most good soldiers make terrible politicians."

Fannon's eyes narrowed. "General, I do not require a lecture on—"

From Randel's point of view, Patton's eyes seemed to flash fire as he leaned across the table toward Fannon. "Let me finish, please. Your staff panicked the other day when I went into a rage. They . . ." The general shuddered. "They turned me off like a lamp and made some 'adjustments,' am I correct? Beyond lowering my voice?"

"Minor ones, I assure you, General—"

"Madam, I sincerely hope those adjustments were minor because if they were not, *you may have ruined me.*"

The greatest gift a general can have is a bad temper. A bad temper gives you a sort of divine wrath and it is only by the use of a divine wrath that you can drive men on when their minds and bodies tell them they can go no further." Patton shivered again. "When we pulled out of the line and turned north toward Bastogne, not a one of my boys thought we could do it, but they didn't want to make me mad by failing. God, but they were magnificent."

"It makes a great deal of sense when you put it that way."

"Of course it does." The general smiled, and Randel realized what a crafty game Patton had been playing. For perhaps the first time in her life Fannon had met her match—and then some. "Now. Am I going to get my chance, or not? You put me in charge—really in charge, I mean. Let Red Team keep Ike in Morale, don't let them know what we're doing over on this side, and we'll win. Guaranteed. I'm willing to stake everything on one throw of the dice. Are you?"

For a moment Randel thought the Over-Director was going to say yes. But she hadn't achieved her position by giving in on anything that readily. "And what will you do if I say no?"

"Nothing," Patton said flatly. "Abso-fucking-lutely nothing. Excuse my language, but it has always made me mad to have to beg for opportunities to win battles, and this is no exception. I won't whine and I won't complain. But I won't make speeches for you, either."

Fannon smiled, though her eyes were cold. "We can always Disconnect you."

"I know all about Disconnecting. I listen, and sometimes I'm not above a little eavesdropping. Therefore, I also know you've never done it, not to a Time Transfer Subject. Well, now's your chance. Disconnect? Switch me off? That doesn't take any balls. I mean, in deference to your gender, guts. You could always switch me back on again. Hell, go ahead! Fry my ass! I was on the way out when you got me, so what do I have to lose? Kill me, or turn me off permanently, or send me back to that hospital bed, I don't care. Either way you'll have lost your investment, and you'll have lost the war. Better start learning your enemy's language."

Randel held his breath. He hadn't expected Patton to issue such an ultimatum, nor to put it so baldly.

Fannon stared at the old warrior. "You really mean it, don't you? You simply won't cooperate with us."

"You are lucky, Over-Director, that I don't demand you bring back my full staff, plus my wife and family."

"Sir," Fannon said slowly, as if weighing every word, "I will give you your chance. If you can do what you claim you can do, I'll find the money—somewhere—to bring back anybody you want."

Patton grinned. "I'll start making a list. Now, ma'am, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." He turned to Randel and Stauchov. "If nobody has ransacked the Punic War era yet, there's somebody in that time period I'd like to talk to you about, somebody I once served under. . . ." ♦

# With Love from the Plague Territories

Mark Rich

The place of my birth you might think the saddest on earth. It lacks the amenities of the East, though it proudly boasts the empty shells of two stores, a few houses, a courthouse, and two taverns, one of those still in business. My arrival improved that town's standing in the annals of population figures and birth counts, for it had, besides what you might call my mother, only one inhabitant. With one stroke I doubled the population.

When I arrived, Increase Olds said to me, "The Link said to keep you. Too bad you can't help in the saloon." Those aren't his words exactly. Such a string of blazing epithets runs through his head he can't help three or five of them popping into his shortest speech. It happens against his will, he once told me, punctuating his assurance with a few sharp points of emphasis.

The second thing said to me by Increase, who was short, thin, and white-haired even back when I was laid at his feet, was this: "Well, you're here to stay. I guess we'll get to know each other, if you grow up into anything worth knowing. I dub you Vermouth, so as to not confuse you with the product." The product was



Illustration by Rob Alexander

whiskey, made from red corn he grew in soil made from the leaves of trees he nurtured in the gravelly Waste Territory made by humanity. "You're just as goddamned dear, I'm sure," he said to me. "But if I'm going to have two things in the neighborhood that can raise a storm in a man, might as well keep the two of you straight." Not more than a few weeks old, I didn't understand anything he said, except maybe the irascibly kind tones.

Hundreds of kilometers of the sorriest land a farmer could want surround Two Corners in the Waste Territory. Stones cover the ground in a thick sheet, with a little sand in the interstices in the fertile parts. You look out from the boundaries of Two Corners, and while you see a few specks of green and maybe a spot of color from a solitary wildflower, mostly you see glacier-rounded rubble to the horizon. In the summer the stones burn underfoot, and you learn to improvise sandals. In the rainy season they feel wet and cool, and make for good bare-footing for a solid six months. It isn't a place without charm. Just without soil, and without people. Not having people, of course, it doesn't have the plague any more. If everyone else could stand to be so alone, we'd have a lot less dying in the world. At least by Increase's reasoning.

I swallowed years down swiftly in that wild place, learning to speak and read from the incubator machine that brought me to Two Corners, and learning to cuss from Increase.

One night I was sitting at the crooked plank table where we ate supper, the one that Increase claimed was older than he was, and he was old enough to remember the mastodons, just about. I poked beans onto my flatbread and was about to take a bite when a memory and a notion slipped into my head. I remembered what the incubator machine told me about my beginnings, which it embellished with tapes of things Increase would say to me when I was just a pebble. Like that one, "We'll get to know each other, if you grow up into anything worth knowing." I couldn't shake those words out of my brain, even if I held my head sideways and knocked on the top.

"Increase," I said, "how'm I supposed to grow up?" He looked at me, chewing, with the same kind of look he gives a rock in the sun when he's trying to guess if it's hot enough to raise a sizzle when he spits. "Hell, Hootch, what for you want to know that?" he said. He could chew beans on one side of his mouth and talk out the other. I never did learn that trick. "The only glory in growing up is that you can do the dumbest damn things without being called a fool, because you get so you can handle people so they don't know how stupid you are. That's all. Not worth it. Might as well stay a kid and do dumb things and have people tell you you're being dumb. It puts starch in your undies, Hootch. It's a whole lot better when people tell you the truth."

"Come on, Increase, tell me. I really don't know."

"You're a kid and you don't know how to be one?"

"How do I know when I'm grown up?"

He swallowed his beans and kept silent until he had come in his mouth to chew. "You're asking me to make something up, aren't you, kid?"

"So long as it's true I don't care if you make it up."

"You got a speck of wisdom there, Hootch, though I don't know where from." He ran one of his thick fingernails over the pockmarked surface of the table. "How about this? You'll be grown up when you can wipe that danged silly grin off your face."

"Got to be something better than that," I said, trying not to grin.

"How about this, then? This one's serious. You want to grow up, then you learn something no one teaches you."

"You mean like I look it up on my own?"

"Something no one teaches you, I said."

"What in the hills is that supposed to mean, Increase? What do you mean, something no one teaches me?"

"Eat your damn beans, boy. I already told you, and if you don't have enough sand in your head to figure out what I told you, why, then, maybe I didn't really tell you anything after all, did I?"

I puzzled over this, finally getting the piece of flatbread far enough into my mouth I could chew on it. I was beginning to think the world might not be so easy to get a handle on as I'd thought.

Increase left someone behind in the eastern territories, a woman he'd loved and lived with twenty years before one of the plague commissions put her into internment care. A few years later, after Increase had already renovated Two Corners in the Waste and began his soil creation project, he received word she'd died. That, he told me later, was one reason he didn't immediately try to find someplace else for me.

"This Two Corners, it used to be part of a community spread fifty miles every direction," he said to me. "Somehow this chunk survived, probably buffered by the moraine on the north side which someone was smart enough not to mine for its sand and gravel. Probably too because the prairie stronghold twenty miles north deflected the main flood waters coming south, especially the last ones that scoured out the last soil. I was the first human to come back. Ruth was going to follow. What a great woman she was, Hootch, goddamn it all to hell and gone! She was going to come out but the damn chicken-poxed Indiana Territory Authority declared her stricken with the plague, even though tests were inconclusive. Condemned her to internment! The rat's innards they use for brains some places! But, anyway, you can see there's place enough for a few people here. At least two. There's room for you."

The loneliness told on us both, but not as much as you'd think. He took me in: that was his concession. It got to me a little harder sometimes. Despite the pleasures—no, I'll say it: the joys, pure joys—of working the crops and learning the scant plants and insects that survived the disaster of human occupation, I began wanting to get to know other children. Especially girls. I learned plenty from my mechanical mother—too much, probably—and wanted to meet some. Preferably ones who liked plants and insects, and all, but girls.

"Everyone died in the Waste Years, didn't they, Olds?"



He looked at me gravely. "Lots did. Life was fine the longest time, and then the wine turned to vinegar, boy. Only worse than vinegar. It was the most mud-assed vile brew you ever had the pleasure of turning your nose up at. Poison, pure and simple killing-then-whiskey poison. It did people in and buried them and then unburied them so it could do them in again and then wash the pieces down the big drain that Louisiana and Texas had become. That was hell, boy. A high-stinking, pestilential hell. If it wasn't for the last floods we wouldn't be able to breathe here. Washed everything and I mean everything down south and sunk Florida for good in the overflow."

"Got kids too?"

"Yup, Hootch. Kids that could have been your friends. Wasn't their fault either. But that's the way of us people, that we folk screw up things double and then skedaddle into the shade like we did something good, never letting the kids know they got the worst ass-hauling of their lives before they were even born. Take you, Hootch. What kind of world did you get born into? You woke up in a land made up of stones and one old man, with a machine to play mother and keep you well. Is that a life, kid? How could parents do a thing like that to anyone? Almighty horse spatterings on a platter, Hootch!"

He calmed down and turned meditative, then motioned me to follow him.

"Come on, you're old enough now, even if Ruth would have kept my cheeks stinging a year if she knew. A glass of whiskey, you and me. Then, tomorrow, I'm going into that machine of yours to find out what it knows." He led the way to the saloon, cussing at the heat and yelling profane encouragements at the solar panels above the still to absorb every ray of sunlight in the sky. He stopped for a moment and pointed out to the stone fields surrounding Two Corners. "Those are gravestones, kid. A million of them without a name printed on a one, but all gravestones."

Once we were in the tavern and he'd served me my first drink, I held up the cup with its thimbleful of chok-ing liquid. I sniffed it and didn't think I could stand it.

"This means I'm grown up, doesn't it?" I tried a sip. My tongue tingled so fiercely I was sure Increase would hear it buzzing.

"Hell, kid, that glass means nothing except what it is. Don't get stupid on me all of a sudden just because you want to be bigger than you are."

"I didn't say I was bigger than I am."

"Glad to hear you talking sense, Hootch."

Increase Olds didn't fool with the incubator machine till I was fourteen, maybe going on fifteen. He figured by then it had provided a basic education, done all the harm it'd been intended to do, and could be risked.

"I'm still wondering what kind of tick off a dead bird's ass would send a baby into the Waste in one of these tin cans," he said.

"It was a rescue, you said so yourself? You said I was out stranded somewhere and Jeebies found me and sedated me and carried me until it found someone alive to take care of me."

"I know what I told you, Hootch. It may be true but I don't know." He looked at me like I shouldn't be so whiny. Then he sat me down. "You know a little history, don't you? You probably don't know it as crooked as it really is. Take the plague. The authorities out east talked like the plague would stick here mid-continent, making us eligible for high-tech relief efforts, which meant they were thinking of ways so they wouldn't have to send in any actual people. Just machines. They came up with all variety of piddle, one being these nursery robots and incubators programmed to go into destroyed areas and search for stranded children who hadn't been affected. They painted it up in Washington colors, all white, made it seem the kind of thing we'd dreamed up ourselves even if we hadn't and didn't want a thing to do with them. My god, the expense that went into the publicity alone! They said out east that nursery robots were already scouting through the Waste, but no one saw more than one or two that I heard of, and then the East was starting to have problems of its own. I don't think the money existed to build very many, and most of those never got this far. Maybe Jeebies was one of the few scouring the Waste, Hootch. Or maybe you came from out east."

"I don't want to be from out east," I said. I knew from Increase what folks out east were like.

"Isn't your fault where you're born. The machine had sense enough to bring you this way, so you're official Waste Territory product. Don't have to worry about that. Now get. I'm hijacking your schoolmarm."

He shoed me out of the grocery store where he'd set up shop. He was going to see who fixed up Jeebies, as we called the old incubator. I ran into the other store where we kept our food and grabbed some bread, corn cakes and a bag of toasted beans, and then filled two glass vials with Increase's "Fourths," the kind of whiskey he said was fit to drink only after you've had seconds and thirds. It suited my purposes, and Increase never missed it. Then I hot-footed it out to the fields.

We sat a month shy of the end of the Uncertain Season, straddling the old summer and fall, when we didn't know if everything would bake blacker than coal dust or if we could keep our fields moist enough that the soil would "take." The leaves and plant scraps we scavenged the previous wet season we set in bins and inoculated with bacteria and worms by seeding in some soil from previous seasons. Increase had been at it more than fifteen years, having started in the middle of the Waste Years, and in that time had made more soil than he needed for growing our food, our prairie flowers, and his whiskey-makings.

Increase had planted alternating rows of plants: three varieties of corn, about thirty kinds of beans and peas, tallgrass, and fifty kinds of wildflowers whose names I was only beginning to master since the incubator wasn't programmed to teach them—species of *Helianthus* and *Asclepias* and *Eupatorium* and dozens of others. Increase and I tended these together. Then, if I had time, I went insect-hunting with my vials of whiskey, hoping to catch something new. Not much survived, on the face of

things. Two Corners seen from the height your shoulders normally carry your head looks like nothing but a few old buildings and trees and some scraggly-looking crops and grass surrounded by a million eye-fuls of rocks. You wouldn't think there was a shred of life left besides what was clutching closely around our shacks. But get down off your shoulders and down onto your hands and knees, and give things a chance to appear in your eye as big as they really are, and you see all kinds of life: springtails, ants, spiders, even a few beetles with some bright colors on their shining bodies. It always made me wonder how people had a chance to ruin things, when they could have been down on their hands and knees watching the little life. They just didn't know the right way to keep busy.

The Waste Years have always been a puzzle to me. I've checked history files and don't find myself much helped. I've researched it as an adult, that is. I understood it well enough when I was a kid. When I got a little bigger, even bigger than I was in the times I'm telling about in this story, I understood it less and less well. It became a big mystery. History files didn't even answer elementary questions. They'd probably been purged, to hide the atrocities that happened *after* the Waste Years. I couldn't even find out which came first: the plagues, the dust bowls, or the floods. The attitude of historians here in the East seems to be one of forgetting the Midwest ever existed. Only by dint of sitting looking at old news releases and vidscans did I put together a few things. So this should be news to most people: it all began with ten days of flooding, winter rains hitting the corn country before the ground thawed. The rains stopped, then began again as the ground warmed, and flooded large areas of several pre-territory states. The rains came and went, and came and went again, coming down in torrents more typical of the tropics than the Midwest. Then followed the hottest five months on record, giving rise to the dustbowl, the first of three if I have my dates correct. The rains resumed in the winter, with no snow, and fell heavily enough that some areas suffered more flooding. The Mississippi became the mud-flow it would remain for over half a decade. The winter rains gradually decreased; but since summer droughts didn't ease as quickly, not enough grew to hold the ground together. Then came the last flood, which began with a six-month season of rains that almost washed the big river clean, but also left nothing more for it to wash away. A good many places sank down to bedrock. In the area around Two Corners and for several hundred miles to each side, the land vanished to leave a corridor of exhumed glacial debris.

The plagues during those years were both plagues and not plagues. I can only explain by saying that the old dustbowl of the 1930s happened when soil was soil, dust was dust, and farmers were farmers. Agricultural schools took over afterward. Soon the soil overflowed with bloom-ensuring fertilizers and pest-killing poisons until even the dust killed birds and made kids sick. In those days, farmers became agriculturalists. They trained in institutions sponsored by chemical corporations, and learned to buy chemicals so the chemical companies could con-

tinue their philanthropic support of education. The land turned into big business, and when the new dustbowl years came during the Waste, the winds stirred up a different dirt than seventy years before, a dirt laden with compounds new to the world. The agriculturalists fought back against the sun and the heat and the dry winds, using new chemicals to kill the only weeds that thrived on drought and leached soils, and other chemicals to encourage growth in the crops they could keep alive through irrigation, and yet others against insects naturally attracted to all this good, artificially boosted forage. They devised new synthetics to replace the soil structure destroyed by years of plowing and contamination, trying to bind the dirt against the wind. Meanwhile people's defenses against disease were failing because of synthetic residues assaulting their systems every time they had a bite to eat, whether of chemical-dusted plants, plastic-coated fruits, or the self-hydrogenating meat from animals that fattened on cornhusks and cardboard and didn't decay when slaughtered. After the first chemical dust storms blew through, disease didn't have much work left to do. It doesn't take a gale to blow a tissue around.

Our own idiocy led to the end of the Midwest as it was then known. We didn't need a war of atomic weapons, having unleashed a chemical war long before in a systematic attack on our own land. Then when it all blew up we wondered why we weren't ready. Dust storms carried every chemical carcinogen known to humanity, for our chemical plants kept producing all of them, even the DDT that kept drifting back into our territories from south of the border and across the sea. The wind carried every agent known to cause birth defects, every poison, and every mutagen. Meanwhile the medical establishment went looking for amoebas and viruses to explain the mounting deaths. Although they isolated a few, economic collapse brought research to a standstill in even the East. Science having come to a standstill, the territories announced the arrival of the plague, and the quarantine of the Waste.

I guess I shouldn't be angry about these things. At any time in history people could look back and scream about the faults of their forebears. We're no different now, though I have to say I never knew how well I absorbed Increase's vocabulary till I learned about the Waste Years, and saw what kind of world I'd missed out on.

Sometimes when I collected insects I checked the dust-catchers Increase had set up a hundred yards west of Two Corners. High, square-framed, cone-shaped funnels sat arranged in a circle waiting to catch any particle blowing in from any direction across the rock plain. The filter sat down in the middle, with scrubber-brushes working constantly up and down to force the catchings into the bins below. Increase had caught the beginnings of a lot of soil this way. "Look at how the colors are all different," he said once to me. "Some of the dust has got to be no goddamn good but look at most of it, the different shades: there's even some black and dark brown in there. You never know if that blew off the sides of Kilimanjaro or off Mars."

Occasionally I'd find insects caught against one of the sieve screens, which we hand-cleaned every few days. Today the winds were mild, but the fans alongside the nets were milking their solar panels for every jolt of electricity they could get. Pressed against the first sieve I found a frail-looking beauty I'd never seen before. To each side of its thin body, large opaque wings fanned out, the background a radiant yellowish orange, streaked and dotted with black. I'd seen pictures of similar things but had never imagined so much color could be squeezed onto one insect.

In my sidebag I had one larger jar without any whiskey at the bottom. Holding my breath, afraid I might spoil my prize even under the rattling assurances of the old fan, I put the jar over the insect. It flew upward against the glass, released from the pressure of the rotors. I clapped on the lid and ran back to Two Corners and the store, where I found Increase on the stairs washing off carrots in a bucket.

"It's a butterfly," he said when I showed him my fluttering prize. Perched on the side of the glass, the insect displayed patterns under its wings even more subtle and wonderful than on the upper sides. Looking at it, Increase smiled as broadly as I've ever seen him smile, and showed some of his fake teeth. "Don't know its name, but I can tell you it's a prairie butterfly. Must've blown from farther out west where there are bigger areas than what we have. Let it loose out by the garden. It does for us as bees do. If we're lucky there's been a big crop out west and enough will blow this way to get established on the prairie stronghold. That'd be good, eh, Hootch. Seems to me pretty good luck to find a butterfly after all these years."

I ran to follow his directions until his voice called me back.

"Wait on a moment, boy. While you're at it, take this pail and water some of the coneflowers that are wilting. Then come on back if you can pry yourself loose from your butterfly. I'm getting some forms from the Link. Adoption papers. I'm going to adopt you."

"Adopt me?"

"You're going to have a last name. I'm adopting a boy who's going to be called Vermouth Hootch Olds. God damn if it isn't a good-sounding name. Vermouth Hootch Olds. Damn."

I ran harder for the garden then. Something odd and strange was going to happen: my name was to change. Ever so slightly, but enough to make a difference. I would become more like Increase, because I'd have a part of his name: Olds. Hootch Olds. God damn if it wasn't a good-sounding name.

In the following weeks we saw the butterfly again, or another like it; and one day we saw two.

"Hell's loose for hotcakes, Hootch, it's like having company," said Increase.

"I saw the first one," I said. "Isn't that something, Increase? Doesn't that mean I'm coming along?"

He swatted me without doing more than punching the air by my cheek. "You still trying to figure out if you're growing up? You saw the butterfly, sure. It's a discovery, Hootch. It isn't putting things together, and thinking some-

thing new for yourself. Making a discovery's a fine thing that doesn't need to be all messed up with other things."

"But my new name, Increase," I said. "Doesn't that mean I'm old enough to be something?"

"You're old enough to be a pain in the omega, Hootch, and that's about all." He looked away with an exasperated look, then back at me. "And wipe that danged silly grin off your face. I could just take a towel to your face sometimes if you weren't such a good-natured squirt, and if it wouldn't be such a waste of perfectly good soap."

We had shots of whiskey together again the night of my adoption. Increase served me two thimble-high increments, just enough, he said, to "set your throat burning and your eyes watering, and, sometimes, your thoughts to wandering." It was a party to end all parties: the forms arrived on the Link, after which Increase filled them out and had me press both hands up to the screen; and the confirmation came back in minutes though it seemed an hour. Plus the excitement about the butterfly. Plus the name: Hootch Olds. I kept repeating it, getting used to the new handle.

"Guess I should tell you what I learned today," Increase said. "After all, what I learned in the incubator gave me the nudge I needed to adopt you. Not that I don't love you, kid. I just didn't know if I wanted to inflict you with my name."

I immediately sobered up, which Increase had told me involved holding your breath so other people wouldn't smell the alcohol.

"Partly I adopted you because of Ruth," he said. "Now, you aren't her baby. We tried, and it never worked. Figured it was one of the effects of the plague years and not getting good food and all. But in a way Ruth sent you. She's the one that punched in the directions so the incubator would find its way here. Because one of the things she could do, Hootch, son, is she could program service robots. Hard to believe because it'd mean your machine's getting on in years. But when I looked into the programming, there it was. Ruth left her signature. It had to have been her. I knew it when I saw it. It must have been one of the few that were actually programmed to go into the Waste and hunt for survivors." He grinned, his sun-crinkled face brightening. As suddenly, it flushed dark. "But I learned something else, Hootch." I thought he'd explode, so quickly did his face turn red. I didn't say a thing, and didn't even reach for my last drop of whiskey, about which I was beginning to have a favorable thoughts.

"I know you're just a kid," he began, "and that you don't have any hold yet on what it means to be alive and what it means to be dead, and what it means to die fairly or unfairly. But I'm telling you anyway because you need to know, and besides you deserve to know about your mother. Well, you know what, Hootch?" His voice was getting high-pitched, and I imagined his untidy mop of white hair standing up straight, going higher with each rise of his voice. Knowing he was going to tell me about my mother, I felt a block of ice suddenly appear in my gut that the whiskey wouldn't warm. "You

know what? She died here in the Waste. With a bunch of others. All of them people who had been put in detention, like Ruth. And you know what that means?"

I shook my head.

"It means they were killed, Hootch. Your mother was killed. The eastern territories were terrified about some new generation of the plague, so they dragged everyone from the detention camps and dropped them into the Waste to die. Do you see why I say the world is still insane, Hootch? It's still run by frigging ass-headed idiots who blow pronouncements out their bung! Well, up theirs! Do you hear me, Hootch! Up theirs! That's what I say! Because you know what else, Hootch? This is why they'd never tell me about Ruth's death! She was in one of those camps, too! And she must have died this same way! She's been out here! She's been bleaching in the Waste, too!"

I'd never seen Increase cry. He did it by shutting up and staring at his whiskey without touching it and then letting the tears work his face into something awful before letting them loose. Then they slipped over his bottom eyelids and went down his cheeks, finding the runnels etched there by sun and wind and sliding down them to the edges of his mouth, which he'd drawn so thinly the tears couldn't have gotten in if they'd had crowbars. I learned more in a few seconds watching him cry than I'd learned all my twelve years from my incubator. I suddenly knew about people being humans, about living, about people being together, about loving, about having had a mother and I guess a father too, and about dying. I'd been surrounded all my life with signs of people dying, and of people living, but I'd seen all those signs without knowing what I was seeing.

Maybe it was proud of me, but I wanted to show Increase how much he taught me so quickly, and I cried, too.

Not long after spotting the two butterflies, we got into the sailplane to head south toward the hottest areas of the northern Waste. Increase had spent more time going deeper into the incubator's memories, made a guess based on what he found, and marked a spot on a map. Meanwhile he set me out to smooth the runway, stomping and raking the rocks into something vaguely flat.

Even knowing what the trip was for I got excited. I loved nothing better than crawling into the flimsy-looking *Royal Shoeborn*, which Increase maintained was its original name despite my protests that someone had painted over what looked to be writing on the side and put "Royal Shoeborn" in sloppy lettering on top. "If it ever was called anything else," Increase said to me once with a voice gone dead serious, "it must have been too dull for human comprehension."

The old solar flier, with flat wings extending to each side twice the distance of its length, rattled twice and then followed its whistling propeller into the sky to begin us on our long, quiet mission. Going up so high, the flier changed the Waste into a finely stippled expanse stretching horizon to horizon. I was as enamored of the sight as I had been the first time Increase took me into

the air. Millions of rocks formed random mosaics across the uneven plain, out of which I could fashion any shape I desired. This time aloft I scanned for patterns I could make into beetles, butterflies, and children. Once as we headed southward I glanced back and saw the small elevation that marked Two Corners; farther, against the northern horizon, I saw the mesa of the prairie stronghold. Aside from one smaller prairie mound, we encountered no major landforms southward, although we saw some low rock ridges, some of them in parallel series that might have been piled and shaped in the last floods.

The surface of the plain grew rougher and choppier after a time, then once again smoothed out; it became dominated by lighter, cream-colored rocks, with patches of light bedrock peering out from the stones, before turning again toward the darker end of the spectrum. Increase passed me some food, and, after taking time himself to eat, lowered the *Shoeborn* so we flew closer to the rock plain and had a better chance of seeing if it held anything unusual. About two in the afternoon we spotted our first bones. They were dissociated but roughly together in the same spot. By three, we'd lost count of the number of white piles we'd seen, and had in sight at forty degrees to the west an area that looked whiter than any other we'd seen.

Even before we were close enough to make out details, we knew what we approached: a vast dumping ground of the plague, the resting place of the plague victim and the plague carrier, of the unfortunates who tested positive for the plague, of the more unfortunate souls suspected of hiding and harboring the plague, of the plague would-be, the plague might-be, and the plague must-have-been. Representing the ones dumped dead and dying, bones rose in thick piles immediately around the landing strip dividing the area. Those dumped there while still alive had their memorials in the scattered bone piles we'd seen the last few hours. Thousands must have died; and a huge number must have arrived already dead. They must have been stripped of everything they had and dumped naked in the desert.

Most desolate of all to contemplate, somewhere among all the rocks and bones, a lone, old machine must have once encountered a mother, dying or newly dead, within whom was a child, a small living person ready to be born.

Increase didn't say a word as he brought us toward the landing strip. He didn't have to tell me how hideous it was even landing there. I could tell that much, young and stupid as I was. Rocks didn't make that strip white. The strip had seen heavy use, and must have grown smoother with each landing and takeoff.

A perverse thought entered my head when I stepped out of the flier to look over the bone plain: I knew that insects still held on in this sector of the Waste, hot and dry as it was, because the bones were blinding, cleaned so well during the winter cool by beetles and flies that they bleached white in the summer heat. I squinted my eyes against the brightness.

"Now Hootch," Increase said, "I know this is going to be a little hard for you. We don't know which bones

here belonged to your mother, just like we don't know which ones might have been Ruth. But I want you to—" Here he stopped and gave me a searching glance, to see how I was taking it all. "I want you to go pick out some bones, just a few to carry back. I don't care which ones you choose. Choose the ones you think are right. We're taking them back, and we'll give them a burial. You'll bury your mother. I'll finally bury Ruth."

I don't remember how I picked out the bones, or what bones I picked out: skulls, limbs, vertebrae, small finger bones or toe bones. I have only the memory of walking among the disarticulated skeletons, face down, stunned by all I saw, and then looking up and seeing the *Shoeborn* sitting too far away for my comfort. The idea suddenly possessed me that the bones were all my fault, or at least my responsibility, since I alone among them had escaped. I knew how easily they could pull themselves back together, gathering their pieces into joints and sockets and standing up to press around me, their vertebrae clattering at each movement. They'd want me to join them, for this was where my bones belonged. I couldn't go back home. I was theirs. Who was I to be living? Who was I to leave them?

I stood frozen still on the white plain beneath the beating sun, afraid almost to breathe. Then something tickled inside my nostrils, and despite my every effort I sneezed, making a massive gift from my lungs to the desiccated air. At that moment I drew far away from that place. I could move again. I walked over and among the skeletons, pushing aside ribs and femurs and jaws; yet at the same time I didn't, for the remains were all in a place infinitely far away from anywhere I'd yet been. I was alive. I was a boy. I saw myself with intense clarity as a child, a living, growing human standing in a graveyard thrown atop the far more widely spanning graveyard of the Waste. I was one mote of blood and flesh atop the endless rubble of past ages.

We didn't pass over Two Corners until late in the afternoon, and reached the prairie stronghold as the sun neared the horizon. The stronghold, a place farmers and developers had somehow missed plowing or cementing under, was an old expanse of the middle continent as it used to be. It was tens of thousands of years old, Increase told me. The roots of the prairie plants went down so deeply that the long droughts never hurt them; and those same roots held together the island of soil sixty feet deep and more while the farmlands and city plots gullied and then ran entirely out into that last, vast stream of liquid land heading south. With the surrounding lands gone, the prairie rose like a mesa above the stone plain. Increase and I'd come many times to check on the plants, harvest a few berries, gather some seeds for our own growing plots, or pull out the few non-native survivors that Increase regarded as fair game for mulch and soil-building.

Increase brought the flier to a stop near the bottom of the stronghold. We hiked up the path on the side, admiring the younger colonizers now covering the flanks of the mesa. Increase carried the shovel. At the top I took in a breath of astonishment, transfixed by the sight

of the prairie. Against the setting sun the high coneflowers glowed in a haze of yellow, dotted here and there with sparks of purple from bergamot and germander and the even brighter yellows of coreopsis and sawtooth. Maybe I was receptive after the sight of the white bone field; but I'd never seen any sight more beautiful than of those flowers against the sun, with a pair of butterflies dancing away to another corner of the expanse.

From the way his clothes hung on him, you wouldn't think Increase had much in the way of muscles. It took him only a few jabs of the shovel to dig a respectable hole, however, and raise a good pile of earth next to it. He took the cloth-wrapped bundle from me, unwrapped the bones once so we could see them, and then bundled them again in the cloth.

"Take one end of the cloth, Hootch," he said.

"They aren't heavy, Increase."

"These are bones for both our people. Best we'd lay them down both together."

I found it hard to believe it could be cool so soon in the dusk, but I shivered, bending over and helping Increase place the bones at the bottom of the hole. He handed me the shovel, but stayed my arm before I could start putting the dirt back in. After a moment, he spoke.

His words, simple as they were, still stick in my head: "God damn it, but we always do things wrong. I don't even know why we should do this, bringing bones here and disturbing the only good, true soil in two hundred miles or more just to bury them. But that's what we've done. Sometimes we have to do things and hope they're the best things we could have done. Isn't much to hope for, but it's something."

Then I shoveled the dirt.

I'd never been on the prairie past dusk and had never heard crickets there before, at least in any number. As the sun fell their voices rose in countless tiny invocations to the equally numerous and equally small stars that appeared overhead with the night. I listened and thought about my mother, whoever she'd been. She must have had a hard time. Not all of us luck out, when it comes to life and how you're allowed to live it. I'd had it pretty good, living out among the rocks in creaky old buildings, keeping busy with Increase by trying to create soil and growing plants. But I sure wished I'd known my mother. Might even have been nice to know who my dad was. I figured I must have had one.

When Increase fired up the lantern so we could trace our way down to the *Shoeborn*, where we'd left the tent, he held it out so I couldn't see his eyes.

I looked away so he couldn't see mine, either.

I knew the courthouse inside and out, since it'd been my nursery for as long as I needed, and then my schoolroom after that. In the old days the courthouse probably served multiple purposes, too. It must have started as a meeting house, and then seen use as council chamber, a church sanctuary, a concert hall, and even storage space. The doors opened wide onto street level, showing the spacious, wood-planked foyer and the courtroom beyond.

Since Jeebies wasn't there when I walked in, the place

looked as sad and empty as I was feeling that day. Didn't seem to me that we'd accomplished much, Increase and I. We'd passed a few years in an empty town, talking with no one except the invisible people strung along the Link in other parts of the world, almost none of them in the Waste. We'd put together a little soil, grown a few plants, some of them to help build and hold the soil, and some to eat. We'd gone out and picked up some bones and buried them in the prairie stronghold. We'd seen a few butterflies come back. Increase had made a little whiskey. I'd collected some insects and even identified them. But what it added up to, I sure didn't know. The oblong windows lining the sides of the courtroom let in light enough to open the whole room to the world, showing off the dust and the worn-down seats on the wooden chairs and the dirt pressed into cracks in the floor. It didn't look the same without Jeebies. Increase had moved her over to the grocery store to look at her innards, and left her there. She'd left behind a depression in the floor, since she'd sat so long in one place that the corner of the room had sagged.

I walked to that corner of the courtroom, a place I'd never stood before. I didn't remember Jeebies ever having moved before. I'd assumed she was fixed in place, despite her heavy treads and Increase's story of her arrival, trundling like a military tank into Two Corners, her two wheel-elbowed arms balanced out to each side, looking more like a mechanical nightmare than the savior of the tube-fed child that rested unconscious within her cushioned womb.

Standing in the corner where Jeebies used to be, I saw the closet to one side. At one time it must have held jackets of townsfolk or the robes of jurors, if they ever wore robes. I'd forgotten about the tall box wedged in there since Jeebies arrived. Originally it had sat atop Jeebies, looking like an upper body but being nothing more than the storage box for essentials in the rescue of human lives: food, sedatives, medical equipment, and water. Increase had taken it off and cleaned it out long ago. I unlatched the door to look inside.

Nothing remained except fragments of plastic broken from the sides. The inner surface had cracked with age. I ran my fingers along one side, peeling away more of the insulation. Whatever had been held within these walls had kept me alive while Jeebies had wandered the Waste, carrying a child, looking for Increase, trying to follow the instructions Ruth had fed it long before.

A large piece fell away. Nested inside the insulation I saw a corner piece of transparent plastic. When I pulled it out of the crack, I saw it was a bag, with paper inside. Gingerly I removed the contents—two sheets of different colors, folded together. The top one was a letter. Even though I had the sense I shouldn't read it, my eyes swallowed it whole before my scruples could kick in.

"Dear Ruth," the letter said. The words ran across the page in neatly typed rows. "Believe me, I understand why you've done it. I can't hold it against you that you've found a man behind those barbed wires. I wish I was him, but I'm not. I can't do you any good anyway. You probably won't even get any letter I send you. And

maybe it's better him than me, since he's got those tales of life on the sea to entertain you with, to take your mind off being locked in a place no human ought to be. And I hope you're right about those twitches of life inside you. I couldn't give you a child. But I'm glad you have one. Even if it's a dirt-rotten world for a child to be born in, you've still got to put your hope somewhere. So anyway don't think I harbor a grudge. Love your man. You've got a heart that needs someone, and I feel better that there's someone there to help you look after yourself. From everything I hear there's no hope for the wall to come down between the Waste and the territories. Too much death here, too much fear of dying there. A goddamn sorry state for us be in, but here we are, you in the camp, me in the Waste. How in the world can I begrudge you your way of coping? Just stay alive, and that's comfort to me.

"With love from the Waste Territory, Increase."

My shirt clung to me from the sweat on my back. Increase wouldn't have wanted me to know that Ruth had ever turned to another man. Increase had me believing that Ruth was the true light in a black world, the one example of solidity, of sound sense in heart and head, during the collapse of everything else worthwhile.

But he'd lived with it. He'd even gone on, continuing the project at Two Corners. Even knowing that Ruth would never come, that he'd be at it alone maybe to his dying day, he'd kept on. Even knowing Ruth was with another man.

I looked at the next sheet. Having transgressed by reading one letter, I figured to go wrong all the way. It was written on battered paper that must have been scavenged from the trash of someone more fortunate.

"Dear Increase," it said. "Not everyone in camp knows it yet, but they're going to let us die. Don't know how it's going to happen, but it's going to happen. I don't want to die without talking to you again. Wish I could. This is the best I can do. I've set the program on this machine so it'll show up on your doorstep someday. I wish I could send you the baby inside me, but it's going to die in the womb when I die. These machines are supposed to be programmed to take any living people out of the Waste and bring them back for detention, but I've fiddled with this one enough so that with any luck it'll find some company for you, some child lost in the Waste, so you don't have to build your empire of dirt and wild plants all by your lonesome. Whomever it finds, it'll be the twin of my kid. Mine has to die, but you'll have the living twin. It'll be our baby, just in a round-about way, Increase. And that baby will live. There never was much of a plague. We both know that. Just general sickness, and the killingness of the poisons we put in the air and dirt. Most important, Increase, is that you keep that kid. Back here, it'd die for sure. The plague's here, but it's just the plague that's always been around the world, the plague of people killing people. The people in charge want everybody who threatens them killed, and the people who aren't in charge want to kill everyone in charge. People in the street want to kill people in houses, and vice versa. It was almost a good thing being



in the camp, starved but at least away from the killing plague. Now it'll finally get us, but I guess we knew it would all along. We were marked for it.

"Want you to know my last thoughts are with you, Increase. I don't have anything else to say to anyone in the world, because right now there isn't any world at all anywhere except that place where you are. Wish I was there. Hope you get this. Hope this arrives with a child.

"With love from the plague territories, your Ruth."

I stared at the letter, rereading it as the light changed position in the courtroom. I thought about wadding it up, ripping it apart, pressing it flat to bleach in the sunlight, spitting on it and stomping the spit in until I mashed the paper into the floor boards. That woman had two-timed Old Increase and still wrote to him as though it were nothing. I didn't think I had it in my head to hate anyone but I discovered I did, for I hated this woman Ruth, the one Increase had held up for me as the one real woman in the world, but who now was frail in my hands, a piece of dust and spittle like the worst of us. I couldn't think of anything worse than to have Ruth changed that way. Ruth! Increase's woman! It was the world ending and the Waste Years back to stay!

But I held that letter in my hands, and time kept passing as it always had, and I didn't know what to do.

When Increase came looking for me later on, he found me still in the courtroom. I'd finally gotten off the floor and put myself in a chair, the two letters in front of me. I wasn't reading them any more. I was just letting their presence wash over me. Somehow I wasn't just in Two Corners any more. I was in the whole world. I was everywhere. This was the most vast and most awful and most powerful kingdom Increase and I had built out in the Waste, the birthing place of new soil. Two Corners was the capital of a new country, populated by one old man and one new one. A grand place, a superb place. And the mail had finally arrived. And I was feeling down that it had.

Increase picked up the letters, read them through, and put them back down. He didn't ask where I'd found them. He must have seen the open box in the corner where Jeebies used to sit, with the new pieces of broken plastic picked apart inside it.

"Well, you know a little more about us folk, don't you," he said. His voice sounded natural as could be, though I imagined that getting a letter now, years old, from his woman Ruth must have twisted him tighter than bindweed inside.

"I wasn't going to show you," I said. "I was going to burn them up."

"Living on these rocks is touching that damn-fangled brain you've got, Hootch. Why'd you want to do something so stupid?"

I felt myself growing lighter. "Maybe I wanted you to yell at me. I don't like these. I don't want to see Ruth changed! Not for you or for me! You never told me!"

"Hell, Hootch, she isn't changed. She's the best woman ever lived. She had another man, sure. She needed him. Those were hard, bad times. I'm glad she found it inside herself to still love anyone."

I thought about that a while. I considered the idea that he hadn't just been talking nice to her in that letter, trying to make her feel better despite going off and doing something stupid like finding anyone else than Increase. But then, he wasn't one to try and make someone feel better. He wasn't that way.

And then again, maybe he didn't think she'd done something stupid. Maybe that letter had been all honesty, through and through. Maybe he wrote that letter just the way he talked.

And maybe she'd been all honesty in that return letter, too.

And maybe again Increase had never painted her all that white. Maybe just my childhood eye had made her that way.

Come to think of it, the picture could have filled up with maybes until I couldn't see anything straight.

Being old sure looked complicated and miserable, from my point of view.

"I've changed my mind all the way," I said. "I don't want ever to grow up. Looks to me I'm better off little." I half said it to make him feel better. I still operated under the impression that I sometimes needed to make him feel better. "I'll just stay a kid."

"Too late for that, Hootch," said Old Increase.

He grinned. He was thin and white-haired with gullies in his cheeks, but he looked to be made of steel to me. I felt like I was made of just nothing.

People heard about Two Corners and what Increase was doing there, thought it made sense, and brought me here out east to study so now I can pretend to know all kinds of things. Mostly I learn from books and from specimens in museums, and by talking with folks Increase's age who know something about the old days. I learn from younger ones, too. Take Eva, for one. She's shown me how folk can get closer than I thought could be. Two people can get like they're tickseed caught in each other's socks. She's even planning on living in Two Corners. With me. We've gotten that way, you see.

I've been thinking about that name. What in the world has just two corners? Most things you look at have four corners. A few, maybe three. Whatever it means to have just two, Eva and I are going to build that place up. We'll expand operations, with about a dozen students and a couple older folks to help. Even with them it'll be slow. Rome wasn't built in a day, is the saying I've heard.

Increase is all for it. From his messages on the Link I guess he thinks I'm a solid, mature oak of a man ready to take things over now. I'm supposed to be some all-fired adult, strong of arm and thick of head.

But the damndest thing is that I've still got that dang silly grin, and the hell of it is I can't wipe it off my face to save my life, once it gets attached there. I've tried in the mirror and it doesn't help.

That's because when I look in the mirror I see where I got it from.

I got it from Increase. It's Increase's dang silly grin looking out at me.

I guess we're still two damn kids the both of us. ♦

# In the Realm of Pure Thought



## Larry Tritten

We were in the realm of pure thought, which was, surprisingly, a sea—not terrain, as we had expected it would be when Dimley had promised to take us on the journey. We were not prepared for this (so confident had been our sense of imagery), and now we found ourselves on the deck of a small craft with bundles of extraneous gear—ropes, pitons, picks, and climbing boots we had supposed we would need once we'd crossed the fields of inquiry and were ready for the assault on the peaks of celebration. Clearly it amused Dimley to see our preoccupations dashed.

Spindrift tickled my face as I stood near the prow of the boat beside Dr. Dimley, the old phenomenologist who had organized the expedition. "Point Moot," he said, directing my attention to the broken, gray crag piercing the mist a mile or so distant. We watched the thickening fog conceal it as it slipped like an afterthought behind us.

"How far out will we go?" I asked Dimley, smiling at Pamela as she joined us at the rail. She was holding a tattered copy of Husserl and the violet crayon she used to underline illuminating passages.

"We'll follow the current of thought a way," said Dimley. "And then . . . just look for

Illustration by Tom Miller

signs of life. Simple." He touched a meditative forefinger to the point of his chin and betrayed a private smile, a somewhat cinematic expression and one that I liked to think had been characteristic of the boldest of explorers—Balboa, Cortez, Livingstone, Hillary, and their ilk.

A sound distracted me from my musing and I looked up, seeing a flock of pastel birds, blue, lilac, soft green, pale yellow, misty amber, and rose pink, keening softly in their graceful passage.

"A flight of fancy," Dimley exclaimed with as much excitement as his disciplined mind would permit. "Fantastic." We shaded our eyes against the brightness of the sky and watched the birds drift westward. "They're looking for food . . . food for thought," Dimley explained. "They dine mostly on whim, the little sardines that come up from the depths of reflection and bask on the surface in the warm water along the stream of consciousness."

The air grew cool as we entered the open sea, errant wind currents rocking the boat. Dimley, Pamela, and I scanned the sea casually for signs of anything that might excite interest. At length a small chain of islands appeared on the horizon, dim as intuition in the nebulous, gray distance, but as we watched they became gradually more distinct. Dimley, who had been silent for an hour or more, gestured and nodded toward the land. "The Meditations," he said. "Just one of the island chains in these parts. Placid islands, where not much happens to rival the sound of the surf and the wind in the trees."

"You've been there," Pamela said.

"Oh, yes, put in for a fortnight once on my way out." Dimley nodded. "But it was dull, boring dull." He smiled. "Now, the Vagaries—we'll pass them soon—those are islands with some character. Exotic flora and fauna. Odd weather. Plenty to keep your mind on its toes there."

An hour or so hence the Vagaries loomed ahead, and after Dimley's description I had half a mind to suggest a small side trip, but on second thought determined that our task would ill accommodate such a frivolous venture. For we were in search of something much rarer than odd weather and queer flora and fauna: original thought, that great white leviathan seen only by a few hardy explorers and seen so seldom as to have the character of legend.

The rest of the day passed in languor for the three of us, Dimley dicking with his sextant and handmade harpoon, Pamela reading her Husserl and working crossword puzzles, me scanning the surface of the sea for profundity. A large school of chimera and a few surface-skimming conceits were all the sea had to offer for the rest of that day. The glimmering twilight drew into evening, and just before the stars came out a lone rainbow-chaser flew directly over the boat, on its way to some stretch of the imagination leagues hence.

The night was peaceful, warm, and alight with star brightness, the wash of the waves against the hull lulling us in our separate reveries.

Morning was a dawning amber dazzle. A single shining ebony inking slapped the water with its tail, and the three of us sat up with a start, stretching, greeting the day, then passing scones and cups of tea around.

The second day we sailed farther into the uncharted

regions to the south. Past noon the sky darkened abruptly, and we found ourselves entering a very bad dream, whirling tempest winds tossing the boat on peaks of choppy waves while flickering scarlet radiances and rolling blasts of thunder shook the sky.

Toward evening we were nearly becalmed. Dimley dawdled at the rail, nibbling a bit of hardtack; Pamela fed crumbs to a hungry school of grasp following in our wake. I spotted some ugly scavenger birds to windward, darting at the waves and making away again with certain small prey in their talons.

"Brood," Dimley explained. "They're catching outsights."

"Outsights?" Pamela asked.

"Insights that are too weak or dumb to survive," Dimley said. "Thus does nature maintain its equilibrium."

Another day passed without a conspicuous event. By now Pamela and I were restless, tedium undoing our thoughts, yet Dimley seemed a very model of stony perseverance—so perhaps it is just that he caught the first glimpse of the leviathan. It was toward dusk. Pamela slept. I mused. Dimley was at the prow, seeking.

"*Cogito!*" we heard him cry. "*Cogito!* Thar she blows!" His cries brought us both to the rail, our hearts pounding, eyes straining for this legendary vision—pure original thought in a sea of consciousness.

Dimley rushed to the wheel and piloted the boat with a stoical resolve straight toward the magnificent beast (bugbear, as some philosophers have called it).

As we drew near the creature, which seemed to lapse in its course to draw us on, Dimley sprang from the wheel, harpoon in hand, eyes wide, leaning forward into the wind like the carved figurehead of a sailing vessel.

Nearer we drew, and nearer. As Dimley rose up on both feet, harpoon poised in his eagerness to pin down this colossal thought (as white as white gold, and big as a great whale, truly colossal, yet altogether shapeless and indefinable), a great scooping, sucking sound seemed to come straight from the depths, and the leviathan simply shrugged itself downward, casually and gracefully vanishing from sight in a double trice and leaving us there on the roof of its world, alone between sea and sky.

"Wh—" Dimley gasped, and became rigid in his stance, the harpoon slipping from his fingers.

"Oh, my," Pamela said. "It was . . . incredible!"

The boat rocked, creaking, on the water and only after a long while did Dimley become animate again. He sat down, and shook his head.

"No . . . not incredible," he said after a while, frowning at his hands. "There is only the credible in these waters. The incredible does not exist. The credible can be perceived. With luck. With diligence."

"*Cogito ergo sum*," I appended, feeling a bit like a protagonist in a scientific thriller who delivers a little epilogue at the denouement of a grand adventure.

And "*Sum*," Dimley echoed, smiling wanly. He got out a small reel, baited his hook with wit, and trolled the fathoms all the way back to port, hoping for a glimpse or two but catching only trite, that little trout you see so many of because it breeds prolifically and inhabits the depths of the sea by the millions, billions. ♦

# Forging the Elements

Stephen L. Gillett

Supernovas—gigantic explosions of a massive, dying star—are the forges of (most of) the chemical elements in the Universe, as I described in a previous column ("The Importance of Being Semi-Semi-Stable," March 1991). And as you might expect, supernovas make some elements more easily than others. Elsewhere I've talked about elements being rarer or commoner—and the reason an element is rare or common depends on nuclear physics, on how easily it's synthesized in the vast stellar conflagration.

In turn, the proportions in which the elements are made has lots of implications for worldbuilding. Obviously it's easier to make a world out of common elements rather than rare ones! For example, it's hard to arrange halogen (fluorine or chlorine) breathers, such as on the planet Niflheim in H. Beam Piper's *Uller Uprising*, simply because chlorine and fluorine are much rarer than oxygen. (Niflheim had gaseous fluorine in the air instead of oxygen, with hydrogen fluoride seas instead of water.)

One reason the halogens are rare is because they're odd-numbered elements. Elements with an odd number of protons are always less common than their even-numbered neighbors. This is called the "Otto-Harkins rule," after the physicists who first noticed it early in this century. The reason is that an unpaired nucleon (proton or neutron) has more energy than a proton in a pair, so such nuclei tend to pick up an-

other nucleon easily during nucleosynthesis (the processes that synthesize elements).

By contrast, not only is oxygen an even-numbered element, but it also has an exceptionally stable nucleus (or rather, it has an isotope, O-16, with an exceptionally stable nucleus). So, oxygen-16 is made abundantly by nucleosynthesis. And thus oxides, including good old H<sub>2</sub>O, are abundant in the Universe. One of the reasons water is such a dandy thalassogen (sea-former) is just that there's a lot of it around.

Don't expect planets made of platinum, either, even though it has an even number of protons (p=78). The most stable nucleus is that of iron (to be specific, the nucleus iron-56). It's at the peak of the curve of binding energy, where the forces holding the nucleus together, against the electrical repulsion of the protons, are at their maximum. Nuclei heavier than iron, such as gold or platinum, *take* energy to make—and for that reason they're much rarer.

In fact, very heavy nuclei disintegrate spontaneously, mostly by throwing off alpha particles (helium-4 nuclei, containing two neutrons and two protons)—and the reason is the buildup of proton repulsion as the nuclei get large. Like electrical charges repel, of course, and the more charges you have together the more they repel. The nuclear strong force, which holds nuclei together, is stronger than the electrical repulsion of the protons, but it acts only

over very short distances. Electric forces, by contrast, fall off much more slowly with distance. So sooner or later they overwhelm the nuclear force, and the nucleus becomes alpha-radioactive.

So you can see that from the properties of various nuclei we can even say something about how the elements are formed. Let's look at this in more detail.

Most elements lighter than iron are formed in a series of energy-producing fusion reactions over the life of a massive star, with heavier and heavier atoms being gradually built up in stages. First hydrogen is fused to helium; then helium is fused to carbon, oxygen, and neon. When helium (and heavier) fusion starts to occur, the star has swollen into a red giant or (for very massive stars) a red supergiant. Such stars are much larger than the Sun, with a vast cool outer atmosphere. The core in which the nuclear reactions are taking place is also layered like an onion: on the outside hydrogen is still fusing to helium, but below this is another layer in which helium is fusing to carbon and oxygen.

If the star is massive enough, such as those that will end up as supernovae, it can eventually build up even heavier nuclei—magnesium, silicon, calcium, and so on, all the way to the peak at iron—in additional layers deeper in its core. This "equilibrium" process varies depending on how massive the star is. The more massive the star, the hotter it

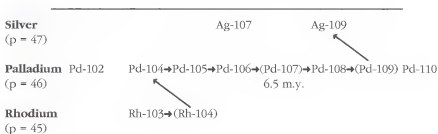
burns; and that determines which nuclei are favored. Nuclei that might be synthesized at low temperatures (such as the s-process nuclei described below) are knocked apart at high temperatures. On the other hand, very massive stars favor "alpha-particle" nuclei, or nuclei that can be thought of as being built up of alpha particles. These nuclei are carbon-12, oxygen-16, neon-20, magnesium-24, and so on, right up to calcium-40, which can be thought of as being made of 10 alpha particles.

Such very massive stars in particular synthesize lots of oxygen-16, that abundant isotope with the exceptionally stable nucleus, and this has lots of implications for world-building. (Of course, "high" and "low" temperature are relative terms here. In both the "cool" and "hot" cases, the temperatures are anomalously hot by everyday standards—billions of degrees centigrade!)

Stars that reach the equilibrium process even make some elements heavier than iron, by the so-called "s-process." "S" is for "slow," because what happens is that neutrons are added slowly to "seed" nuclei. There are lots of free neutrons flying around, byproducts of the main nuclear reactions, and these can attach themselves to other nuclei. Now, you don't make much in the way of heavier-than-iron elements this way, but you make enough to be interesting. As I said, all the nuclei heavier than iron are very rare anyway, so every little bit helps.

Why is "slow" neutron addition important? Add a neutron to a nucleus. Sooner or later, as you keep adding neutrons, you will get an unstable nucleus. A neutron will spontaneously change into a proton, and to preserve electric charge, an electron is shot out. (A neutron has no electric charge; a proton plus an electron also has no net electric charge.) This process is called "beta decay," because (for historical reasons) the electron that's shot out is called a beta particle.

In the s-process, neutrons are added so slowly there's time for beta decay between each added neutron. This means the s-process can't make some neutron-rich stable nuclei. See



Typical elements heavier than iron; "p=" gives the number of protons. (Iron has 26 protons.) The s-process ("slow neutron addition") nucleosynthesis path is shown by the arrows. Note that the s-process cannot make the nucleus Pd-110, because unstable Pd-109, with a half-life of only 13.5 hours, always decays into Ag-109 first. Pd-110 can only be made by the r-process (rapid neutron addition). (Although Pd-107 is also unstable and eventually decays into Ag-107, its half-life is so long—6.5 million years—that it doesn't have time to decay during the s-process. Although the neutrons are added "slowly," they're not added *that* slowly! In fact, as I mentioned in my column in the March 1991 issue, a little bit of Pd-107 was still around when the Solar System formed.)

Conversely, Pd-102 can't be made by adding neutrons at all, whether rapidly or slowly; it can only be made by the p-process (proton addition).

the figure above, for example. You'll never make any palladium-110 by the s-process, because palladium-109, with a half-life of only 13.5 hours, always decays into silver-109 first.

We know that s-process synthesis is happening in stars right now. Some massive red giant stars have unusual abundances of elements such as zirconium (with 40 protons) in their outer atmospheres. Now, of itself this doesn't prove the zirconium was made in the star. Maybe some process just happened to concentrate it there instead.

But some such stars also have detectable technetium (43 protons). Now, technetium has no stable isotopes; even its longest-lived isotopes have half-lives of only about a million years, which is very short compared to stellar lifetimes. So the technetium can't have been around when the star formed. It has to be newly forged in the star itself. Presumably, after the technetium was formed in the star's core, convection currents in the star worked the element up to the surface where it could be seen.

So far, most of what I've said applies to most stars, not just to stars that end up as supernovae. After all, *all* stars make new elements by building them up out of hydrogen. The problem, of course, is getting the

elements out once they're formed! They're pretty much stuck inside the star (although there are ways of getting a little bit of synthesized elements out of sub-supernova stars—as we'll see).

But, as you might expect, the most efficient way of getting the elements back out is (yes!) a supernova, because the vast explosion disrupts the entire star so all those newly forged atoms in the outer layers can get sprayed out. What drives the explosion is gravitational collapse of the star's inner core when it finally runs out of nuclear fuel.

New elements, including most elements heavier than iron, also get made in the explosion itself, though. How so? Because the ferocious blizzard of nucleons loosed by the explosion piles more particles onto seed nuclei to build heavier nuclei.

In the p-process, for example, protons are added to nuclei ("p" is for "proton"). This makes those proton-rich nuclei (such as Pd-102 in the figure) that are bypassed by the s-process. Protons are just hydrogen nuclei—and there are a *lot* of them flying around in the aftermath of a supernova explosion! Since they have an electric charge, though, it's harder to add protons to nuclei than to add neutrons, because the positive charge of the proton and the

nucleus repel. Hence, p-process isotopes are lots rarer than s-process isotopes.

But where the supernova really shines (so to speak) is with the r-process. "R" is for "rapid," and it means neutrons are added *rapidly*—before the nucleus has a chance to beta-decay into something more stable. This is the only way to make neutron-rich nuclei such as Pd-110 (see the figure).

And especially: the r-process is the *only* way to make nuclei heavier than lead (p=82) and bismuth (p=83). All elements heavier than bismuth are alpha-radioactive; that is, they fly apart again by throwing off alpha particles. And the elements just heavier than bismuth are very short-lived indeed. Imagine adding a neutron to bismuth-209, for example. You get bismuth-210, which rapidly beta-decays to polonium-210, which rapidly throws off an alpha particle to give lead-206. (The half-life of Po-210 is only about 10 weeks.)

So you're right back where you started—at a lead or bismuth isotope. However, certain isotopes of thorium (p=90) and uranium (p=92) have very long half-lives—billions of years. Even though these atoms are unstable, therefore, they can persist over geologic time. In fact, they're very important as power sources for keeping Earthlike planets habitable.

The only way to make these heavy nuclei is with the r-process. You have to pile on a lot of neutrons in a *big* hurry, before the nucleus has a chance to alpha-decay. And the only place to do that is a supernova explosion. (So when we break down uranium atoms for energy in a nuclear reactor, we're using energy that was stored in a supernova explosion billions of years ago.)

Finally, I should mention that not all nuclei are made in stars. A few light nuclei—lithium, boron, and beryllium—are very delicate and very rare. Although stable, because they won't decay into something else, they're rapidly broken up by nuclear reactions. They won't last in the harsh environment of a stellar interior.

For a long time the source of these nuclei was uncertain. Now, though,

it seems that they're slowly formed all the time, in space or on a planet, by cosmic-ray spallation, which is the shattering of another nucleus by cosmic radiation. (Some lithium-7 was also formed in the Big Bang.) Cosmic rays are high-energy particles sleeting through space whose origin is uncertain. They act like natural atom-smashers, though; when a cosmic ray particle collides with something like an oxygen atom, it can break off (or "spall"; hence "spallation") enough particles to leave behind a nucleus of beryllium or boron.

And last—and most interesting for SF worldbuilding—what variations might there be in the element abundances? For example, in a number of stories, Poul Anderson has suggested that early generations of planets, formed before the interstellar medium had been much enriched in heavy elements, might be impoverished in iron.

This probably won't happen, though, at least in this way. Even first-generation supernovae will build up to iron, and they'll make the same proportion of iron to other elements as supernovae today. So, although there won't be as much iron (and other heavy elements) as there is today, you won't notice. Even now, most of the Universe is still hydrogen and helium, but it all gets blown away when you build a solid planet.

But you might be able to change the element mix in another way. Here and there, *non*-supernova sources of elements enrich the interstellar medium. These include such things as stellar winds from giant stars (the stellar wind is a continuous very thin flow of subatomic particles—and some nuclei—away from the star). Planetary nebulae, the shells blown off by dying red-giant stars, can also furnish some new elements back to interstellar space. (When a red-giant star that isn't massive enough to continue fusing carbon into heavier elements runs out of helium fuel, it blows off its outer layers. They become a planetary nebula, and the star's core becomes a white dwarf—a tiny, hot, dense star. Planetary nebulae are made by less massive stars than those that make supernovae, and the explosions

aren't nearly as violent. One familiar example is the Ring Nebula in the constellation Lyra. Our Sun will blow off a planetary nebula in about 5 billion years, after passing through its red-giant phase.)

The problem is that these other processes don't make much in the way of elements heavier than iron—after all, that takes energy. Sure, you get a little bit; you make some s-process nuclei from all those neutrons flying around. But you won't make any r-process nuclei, and in particular you won't make any of the heaviest r-process nuclei: thorium and uranium. And that's a problem.

Now, not having nearly as much gold or platinum, say, is hardly world-shaking. But you don't have enough uranium and thorium, it could be world *un*-shaking!

The reason? The slow decay of these long-lived, naturally radioactive elements furnishes much of the energy to keep a planet running; to drive plate tectonics, volcanoes, and all the other processes that build up the land. Without them, erosion takes over, and vital nutrient elements end up buried and useless. You also end up with a dull landscape indeed, with flat-bottomed, largely stagnant seas pole to pole. In fact, as I described in "The Air We're Standing On" (March 1992), Earth's tectonic cycling helps regulate our climate.

Now, a planet the size of the Earth doesn't run down fast. It has lots of heat stored just from the gravitational energy of accretion, and as that heat slowly leaks out it helps run the planet. Something like 40% of Earth's outward heat flow now comes from its stored heat. But that other 60% of heating from radioactive decay is crucial to keeping Earth active and habitable.

Even supernovae themselves don't always make much in the way of r-process elements. The vast nebula that collapsed to form our Solar System about 4.6 billion years ago probably got an initial shove from a nearby supernova. That supernova injected some newly formed oxygen-16 into the nebula, and probably also a little aluminum-26. (Aluminum-26 decays into magnesium-26



with a half-life of only 700,000 years. As I mentioned in "The Importance of Being Semi-Semi-Stable," we find enrichments of magnesium-26—as well as oxygen-16—in some ancient aluminum-bearing minerals in certain meteorites. These minerals formed when the magnesium-26 was still aluminum-26; which means that a supernova had just put some aluminum-26 into the nebula.)

But that supernova *didn't* put in much in the way of new r-process elements. So if the solar nebula hadn't had enough thorium and uranium already, the Earth would have been out of luck.

(There's one possible out, even without thorium and uranium: the long-lived radioactive isotope of potassium, K-40, is also an important source of Earth's internal heat. And it's not an r-process nucleus. In fact, you don't even need a supernova to make it; it's lighter than iron. So maybe you could just run a planet with K-40 decay. However, as far as I've been able to tell, potassium-40 is an out-of-the-way nucleus in nuclear reactions. It's just a by-product, and so it's always rare. On Earth right now, for example, K-40 makes up only one atom in 10,000 of ordinary potassium—and even when Earth was formed, it was only one atom in a thousand.)

A stagnant, run-down planet on which mountain building has ceased, and on which shallow seas run pole to pole, uninterrupted by continents or islands—an unexpected result from the vagaries of atom-forging! World-building is indeed a subtle business, and I'll talk about it a bit more next month.

#### Reference

Cox, P. A., *The Elements*, Oxford University Press, 1989, 207 pp.

A good, mostly nontechnical introduction. ♦

# About the Authors

With all due respect to that famous P. O. box in Schenectady, ideas are where you find them—and it seems that **Gregory Benford** can find one in even the most innocuous of places. Telling how he came to write "The Dark Backward," Greg relates that "I saw a poll which showed that of dead writers (i. e., not Stephen King) Shakespeare and Hemingway are by far the most well known." The rest, as they say, is history.

This story marks Greg's second appearance as a crafter of fiction recently, following the publication of "Touches" in our December 1991 issue. A physicist by profession, he's also one of the most prolific and most popular writers in the science fiction field . . . and his name will be back in these pages again before too much longer.

**Richard Chwedyk** made his SF debut in the November 1990 issue of this magazine with a piece titled "A Man Makes a Machine," and now he's back with a remarkable piece of work that he calls "Last One Close the Door." For reasons that should be apparent after you've finished reading it, Rich wants to dedicate the story to the winners of the 1990 Nobel Prize in Physics: Henry Kendall, Richard Taylor, and Jerome Friedman. "When I saw them in Stockholm," he says, "their graciousness, dedication and humility impressed me as much as their fascinating work."

**Paul Levinson** says he reads, and writes, science fiction, because "it's the only fiction that deals with what it is that makes us quintessentially human: our ability to think and dream beyond our surroundings." There can be no more appropriate example of that viewpoint than "Albert's Cradle," Paul's first sale to this magazine.

**Tanya Huff** broke into the genre with a story in the November 1986 issue of *AMAZING*® Stories called "Third Time Lucky," featuring a fetching character by the name of

Magdelene. More than seven years later, Tanya and Magdelene are back again with "Nothing Up Her Sleeve," the fourth story about that character that has been featured here. "If I could be any of my characters," says Tanya, "I'd like to be Magdelene. She knows exactly who she is and what she wants."

It's about time for **Kathe Koja** to put out another novel . . . which means it's time for us to give you a brief look at what she's been up to lately. "Metal Fatigue" is a small slice of *Stein*, which will be released in hardcover next month.

**Steve Gross** and **Sasha Miller** met electronically when he hooked into the Online Writers' Workshop that she conducts on CompuServe. He lives in Delaware, she in California; but that didn't prevent them from teaming up on a story. "Dark Glass," the result of that collaboration, is Sasha's first sale to us . . . and Steve's first sale to *any* magazine.

**Mark Rich** has made other sales to professional markets—most notably, he'll have a story in the *Full Spectrum 4* anthology that comes out next month—but we managed to get "With Love from the Plague Territories" into print even sooner than that. Mark is also the author of *Lifting*, an award-winning collection of short stories that originally appeared in the small press.

**Larry Tritten** has had hundreds of pieces of writing published, including a story in our November 1991 issue, but we'd venture to say that none of them was as (ahem) thought-provoking as "In the Realm of Pure Thought."

With "The Storming Bone" (September 1991), **Ian McDowell** demonstrated his ability to tell the story of the Arthurian legend in a way that is both distinctive and compelling. To prove that story was no fluke, we're proud to present the sequel, "In the Kingdom of Teeth." Enjoy. ♦

# Why Science Fiction?

Ben Bova

---

What is there about science fiction that makes us love it so? Why do readers read it and, more importantly, why do writers write it?

To me, one of the greatest attractions of science fiction is its intellectual content. That's right, intellectual. Compared to what passes for fiction elsewhere, science fiction is the thinking person's literature. It is a literature that is *about* something. Well, most of the time, anyway.

The idea content of science fiction is crucially important, so important that science fiction is often called "the literature of ideas." At their best, science-fiction stories not only excite the sense of wonder, they also have significant relevance to the world we live in.

I am speaking of *science-fiction* stories, meaning stories in which some aspect of future science or technology is so integral to the tale that if you took the science/technology element away, the story would collapse.

Not every tale published under the "science fiction" rubric is a science-fiction story, by that definition. Publishers have lumped together all kinds of fantasy, horror and anti-science dystopias into the "science fiction" category. You can see from the titles in the "science fiction" section of your nearest bookstore that very little in there meets the definition I just gave. Depressingly little.

For that reason, some have suggested calling the field "speculative fiction." Let's just call all that other stuff SF and apply the term *science fiction* strictly to the kinds of stories that I defined above, those that are usually called "hard SF."

John W. Campbell, the most influ-

ential of all science-fiction editors, fondly compared science fiction to other forms of literature in this way: He would spread his arms wide (and he had long arms) and declaim, "This is science fiction! All the universe, past, present and future." Then he would hold up a thumb and forefinger about half an inch apart and say, "This is all the other kinds of fiction."

All the other kinds of fiction restrict themselves to the here and now, or to the known past. All other forms of fiction are set here on Earth, under a sky that is blue and on ground that is solid beneath your feet. Science fiction deals with all of creation, of which our Earth and our time is merely a small part. Science fiction can vault far into the future or delve deep into the past.

I don't intend to badmouth the mushy-soft SF, the glitzy Hollywood-type dystopias or the various kinds of fantasy and horror that now crowd the SF field. I seldom read them, and therefore I really don't know much about them. But science fiction, the type that is based on the real world as we know it, has been my life. I've been reading it since junior high school, writing it for more than four decades.

Over the past few years, several editors have told me they are longing to see "hard SF," real science-fiction stories. They tell me they are glutted with soft SF and fantasy and other types of stories. There is a demand for science-fiction material that is not being met by the writers.

Why is this so? Perhaps it is because honest science fiction is the toughest kind of fiction to write. Every time I hear the term "hard science fiction," I think to myself, "Hard? It's

goddamned exhausting, that's what it is!"

No less an authority than Isaac Asimov, who wrote mysteries and limericks and nonfiction on every subject from the Bible to the Big Bang, frequently acknowledged that science fiction is more difficult to write than anything else.

This is because every good science-fiction story must present to the reader a world that no one has ever seen before. You can't take it for granted that the sky is blue, that chairs have legs, or that what goes up must come down. In a good science-fiction story the writer is presenting a new world in a fresh universe. In addition to all the other things that a good story must accomplish, a good science-fiction tale must present the ground rules—and use them consistently—without stopping the flow of the narrative.

In other forms of fiction, the writer must create believable characters and set them into conflict to generate an interesting story. In science fiction, the writer must do all this and much more. Where in the universe is the story set? Is it even in our universe? Are we in the future or the distant past? Is there a planet under our feet, or are we dangling in zero gravity? The science-fiction writer must set the stage carefully and show it to the reader without letting the stage settings steal all the attention from the characters and their problems.

Indeed, one of the faults found with science fiction by outsiders is that all too frequently the underlying idea or the exotic background is all that the story has going for it. The characters, the plot, everything else

becomes quite secondary to the ideas.

The characters in science-fiction stories need not be human beings, either. They may be androids or robots or aliens or sentient trees. This also presents problems. Where anything is possible, everything has to be explained. Yet the modern writer does not have the luxury of spending a chapter or two giving the life histories of each major character, the way Victorian writers did. Or page after page of pseudoscientific justification for a self-aware intelligent robot, the way Hugo Gernsback wanted.

Okay then, if science fiction is so tough to write, why bother? Because of its *power*, that's why.

This tremendous latitude, this ability to set a story anywhere/anywhen, not only presents the writer with a massive set of problems. It also gives the writer the marvelous opportunity—and perhaps the responsibility—to offer a powerful commentary on the world of today by showing it reflected in an imaginary world of tomorrow (or, in some cases, of distant yesterdays).

In a sense, nobody writes about the future. Every writer is really writing about the world of today and using an exotic science-fiction setting as a way of showing today's problems in a more revealing light. Every writer is exorcising the demon that's tormenting him or her. That's why writers write and painters paint and musicians play: because they are driven from within. If they weren't, they would have become plumbers and lived much simpler, less stressful, and wealthier lives.

There is a power in science fiction: the opportunity to *make the reader think*; the ability to reveal facets of our world through reflections from a world of imagination.

Think of the science-fiction tales that have made the most lasting impression on the field. And their authors. Robert Heinlein was certainly not offering bland pastorals. Frank Herbert gave a major impetus to the environmentalists. Ray Bradbury showed the evil that lurks within our own hearts in those *Chronicles* about Mars, as he did in *Fahrenheit 451*. Arthur Clarke, Ursula LeGuin,

Gregory Benford, Harlan Ellison—their stories have something to say far beyond the requirements of mere entertainment.

That is why many of us who love science fiction have our doubts about “shared worlds” and franchised universes. Certainly one may write good fiction in a “Star Trek” format. But by using a ready-made set of characters and background, the author loses the chance to invent a unique universe and people it with fresh characters never seen before. Perhaps some writers feel that this is the best they can do. I challenge that self-defeating assumption. Dream your own dreams! Write your own stories.

All too often writers fall back on standard backgrounds that were fresh and exciting a couple of generations ago, but have become stale and trite today. Face it: interstellar spaceships are not going to operate like ocean liners. No one will establish colonies on any of the planets of this solar system. The world will not revert to feudalism in the aftermath of a global catastrophe. When we finally meet intelligent aliens they will not be like any creature of Earth, neither physically nor mentally.

With all the enormities of space and time to play with, it is distressing that so few writers think any original thoughts. They tend to fall back on the well-trodden backgrounds and ideas from the stories that they read when they were young and impressionable.

My own work, for the most part, has stuck pretty close to the here-and-now. Maybe it's because I have spent much of my life dealing with the politics of science; after all, you write best about what you know best. The juncture where science and politics meet is a fascinating area for me.

The *Voyagers* novels, for example, begin with the world as it was in the late 1970s and then examine the changes that would be caused by the certain knowledge that other intelligent races exist in the universe. What would Washington and Moscow and Beijing do if they knew that an alien spacecraft had entered the solar system? What would the Pope do? Or Billy Graham?

The “invasion from space” plot is a hoary old theme, I know. I knew it when I first started writing *Voyagers*. Back in the Fifties, when the hydrogen bomb and the Cold War were new and so terrifying that suburbanites were digging bomb shelters, science fiction abounded with tales in which the bickering nations of Earth united to face a threatened invasion from space. Often the threat was phony, the work of a few brilliant scientists who wanted to unite the world and avert World War III.

In the *Voyagers* novels I took a different tack. It seemed obvious to me that the bickering governments would each strive their utmost to be the first to contact the incoming aliens, to make a deal that would put the aliens on their side. Even when they reluctantly agree to a joint scientific effort to contact the alien spacecraft, their secret agenda is to use the scientists to further their own chances of getting all that juicy alien technology for themselves.

Was I writing about the future? About alien contact? On the surface, yes. Actually, as it turned out, I was using the concept of advanced aliens as a metaphor for advanced technology. How do governments and corporations and individual persons face up to the titanic changes brought about by swiftly advancing technology? I did not realize it when I started to write the three-volume *Voyagers* tale, but that was my real subject. Nobody writes about the future.

I could give other examples. My latest novel, *Mars*, is a very realistic look at the first human expedition to the red planet. We follow the astronauts and scientists on their mission, and the politicians and loved ones who remain on Earth. We see Mars as it really is—or as nearly so as possible, based on what our unmanned probes of Mars have revealed.

Beyond the surface story, *Mars* has a subtext that examines a vitally intriguing issue (at least it's intriguing to me): How do scientists gather new knowledge when they are out at the jagged edge of observability and understanding? When two scientists look at the same shaky piece of newly obtained information and see radically different things, how do

they react? How do they feel? What do they say and do to prove one point of view and reject the other?

When one scientist thinks he sees a cliff dwelling set into the cleft of a Martian valley and all the others think he's crazy, how do they settle the question? When they have neither the time nor the equipment to get to the cliff for a hands-on examination. That is what *Mars* is really all about.

I could go on. *Privateers* looks at an America that has given up on space, and consequently, on itself. Even the *Orion* novels, fantastic adventures that delve into the distant past, deal at heart with the relationships between humans and their gods. The point is that I try, in my novels, to offer something to think about. I try to bring fresh ideas and fresh challenges to the reader's mind.

My dear friend Gordy Dickson calls such works "thematic novels," meaning novels having a strong point of view which the author wants to impart to the reader. Sometimes, when the author goes too far, such works can slip into propaganda. Done properly they can be powerful statements that make readers *think*. Remember Heinlein, Herbert, et. al.

I believe science fiction should encourage people to think. God knows we have enough forms of amusement that discourage or actively prevent rational thought. Even in most contemporary literature (and a growing percentage of SF) the emphasis is on emotional reaction rather than rational thought. Science fiction is the home ground for the thematic novel today; science fiction can and should be for the thinking reader.

The classic methods for generating thematic stories are well known. The writer asks, "What would happen if . . . ?" and fills in the rest of the sentence. Alternatively, the writer can look at a certain idea or trend and ask, "How will the world look if this goes on?"

Professional futurists, specialists who earn a living from making forecasts of social, economic, or technical trends, call these two techniques "scenario writing" and "trend extrapolation." They got the techniques from science fiction, and they have never adequately acknowledged

their debt to our field. (Which may be just as well: futurists tend to be comparatively dull, unimaginative, and consistently wrong.)

Many of my novels begin with a theme, a point of view, an *idea* that I want to explore. This does not mean that I sit down to write the fictional equivalent of a political pamphlet, where I want to support a certain position that is well established in my mind before the first word is put down. I am not in the diatribe business; neither am I a partisan of any fixed political party or formula.

I regard these thematic novels as true explorations, where the author and reader investigate a certain concept or group of ideas, examine a mindset, look at a world that might actually come into being within the lifetime of the reader.

The danger of the thematic novel is that it can slide into propaganda, as noted above. There are two things that the author can (must!) do to avoid falling into this pit:

First, do your own thinking. *Never* sit down to write a story that supports an existing political position. Develop characters that represent powerfully opposing views and let them work out their own positions as the story progresses. If all goes well, those characters will soon enough take over the story and carry it to conclusions that you were not aware of when you began writing.

Second, eschew the pleasure of creating a villain. Every story needs a protagonist and an antagonist, even if the antagonist is nature itself or the inner conflicts within the protagonist's soul. In thematic novels the antagonist tends to be a person, a character. The author must know that character so well that the novel could be turned around 180 degrees, written from the antagonist's point of view, making the "villain" into the "hero."

As a thought experiment, imagine writing "Hamlet" from the point of view of Claudius. After all, he is the only sane person in all of Elsinore. He may be ruthless. He has certainly committed murder. Or perhaps he is merely a strong man who fell hopelessly in love with his brother's wife. Interesting possibilities there.

To make a thematic novel work

well, the story should have a strong relationship to the real world. This is why I set most of my novels in the near future, the years that most readers can confidently expect to see for themselves. The world that I usually start with is the world as it exists today, or will exist in the next decade or so. Then I begin to examine what would happen if . . .

This technique has served many writers quite well over the years. It was H. G. Wells's standard operating procedure. (If you are going to steal, steal from the best.)

When you begin your creative work with the real world, you must then populate such stories with real people. These characters should behave as people normally do, at least at the outset of the story. They must be people whom the reader can recognize and sympathize with. Even the aliens and robots and sentient trees must display human emotions and human problems. Otherwise they will be too abstruse or—worse—too dull for the reader to care about.

Remember, the reader wants to *be* the protagonist. The true art of fiction is to sweep the reader into the world you have created and make the reader forget he or she is sitting in an uncomfortable chair squinting at your words in a book. The protagonist should be someone that the reader wants to be. Every work of fiction is an exercise in psychological projection.

It seems strange when you stop to think about it, but most science-fiction stories are written in a very naturalistic, realistic style. Fantastic settings and incredible feats may abound in such stories, yet the prose is usually unadorned and straightforward. There is a reason for this. If you want to make the reader believe what you are saying, if you want the reader to accept those fantastic back-grounds and incredible deeds, it is easier if the prose you use is as simple and realistic as you can make it.

Again, look at H. G. Wells. In almost journalistic prose he can take us from a Victorian drawing room to a time-travel adventure or an invasion from Mars. He gets us to accept the ordinary setting that he starts with, then carries us into a fantastic tale.

Experimental writing is no stranger to science fiction, and several of the best SF writers are known more for their style than their content. But in general, hard science fiction is presented in realistic prose so that the reader can forget about the writing style and concentrate on the story. The prose style becomes transparent, like a looking-glass that we step through to get into the marvelous world on its other side.

The writing style helps to get the reader to suspend disbelief and accept the reality of the tale being told. However, the story must be consistent; otherwise the reader stops suspending his or her disbelief. It is perfectly possible to lead the reader from the here-and-now to the mines on the Moon or the cloning of the President of the United States or the struggles of a religious sect to establish a colony on the planet of another star. But it must be done in a way that does not jar the reader so badly that he or she stops reading.

My double novel, *The Kinsman Saga*, is an example of what I have been talking about. In 1966 I was working at the laboratory where the first high-power lasers were invented. I helped to arrange the first top-secret briefing in the Pentagon to show the Department of Defense that lasers were now much more than laboratory curiosities.

It became clear to those of us involved in this work that such lasers could eventually lead to a system of armed satellites in orbit capable of destroying ballistic missiles.

I examined that possibility in the novels *Millennium* and *Kinsman*. Years later I rewrote them, in the light of unfolding history, and combined them into the *Kinsman Saga*.

I had no political ax to grind. When I wrote *Millennium* and *Kinsman*, there was no Strategic Defense Initiative; SDI would not begin until almost ten years later. What I wanted to accomplish, as an author, was to examine how the advent of this new technology would effect global politics—and the life of a certain human being whom fate casts into a pivotal role in this arena.

Chet Kinsman was a character I knew very well, from short stories I

had been writing over the years. He became the pivotal character for the novels. All the other characters were drawn from life, including at least one friend who is a well-known science-fiction writer and another who is a world-famous folk singer.

The technology dictated the time frame for the novel. The characters drove the plot to its climax.

Interestingly, when the individual novels were originally published, in the mid-1970s, they were reviewed very kindly. When *The Kinsman Saga* was published in 1987—the same two novels, slightly rewritten—it was attacked on political grounds. The “science fictional” dream of an orbital defense against nuclear missiles had become the real-life Strategic Defense Initiative, “Star Wars,” and *The Kinsman Saga* found itself in the midst of a highly politicized controversy.

Which brings us to the risks that the thematic novel presents to the author.

The first risk is that history catches up with near-future novels. Much of the *Saga* is history now, and some of it is history that never happened in the real world. By the turn of the century we will see if the technologies that are now called “Star Wars” leads to a more peaceful world in which no nation’s missiles can threaten anyone. By then the *Saga* will have to stand on its own as literature without any prophetic overtones, just as *1984* and a myriad of “first men to the Moon” novels have had to face the music.

The second risk—and this surprised me—is that so many science-fiction readers want nothing to do with realistic stories. They seem to be especially frightened of stories populated by characters who are realistically portrayed as human beings. Apparently a sizable fraction of the hard-core audience for science fiction is afraid to read about characters human enough to bleed, or sweat, or stumble. They want to avoid dealing with real human emotions and frustrations. They want superheroes, or at least super people.

Decades ago, Kurt Vonnegut pointed out that most science-fiction characters behave as teenagers, re-

gardless of their alleged age in the story. To some extent the field is still bedeviled by this attitude among its most faithful readers.

Fortunately, an honestly written realistic novel can find legions of readers outside the hard-core science-fiction aficionados. Much of the market for thematic novels lies among readers who pick up little, if any, other types of SF.

Finally, the thematic novel runs the risk of political prejudice. As noted above, *The Kinsman Saga* was attacked by critics as “hawkish”—even when the story concluded with an international organization rising from the ashes of the United Nations to maintain world peace. The very same novel led some real hawks to denounce the *Saga* for its liberal, internationalist flavor! (I don’t feel much like either a hawk or a dove. As an admirer of Athena, my totem is the owl.)

Once certain critics have pigeon-holed an author in their pigeon-sized brains, however, no matter what the author writes from then on, those critics will review their conception of the author rather than the fiction the author has produced. In my case, thematic novels such as *Privateers* and the *Saga* have convinced some critics that I am a hawk. They report on my unsatisfactory (to them) political orientation first, and then might offer a commentary on the novel under consideration. Or might not.

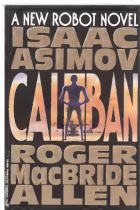
Those are the risks of writing thematic novels. I think that science fiction is ideally suited to such work, which is why I am in this field. It’s not the gadgetry that’s important. I’ve been called a “hard science” writer for decades now, even though I’ve been writing about politics and sociology.

What is important is that this field of contemporary literature that we call science fiction allows a writer the scope to examine real ideas and the real world. Which in turn offers a writer the chance to say something worthwhile, to write fiction that can have an impact on readers.

Science fiction should be *about* something. To throw away that opportunity is a criminal waste of time and talent. ♦

# Tomorrow's Books

## March 1993 Releases



Compiled by Susan C. Stone  
and Bill Fawcett

**Jerry Ahern: *The Survivalist #25: War Mountain*** Zebra Adventure, pb orig, 384 pp, \$3.50. John Thomas Rourke and his freedom fighters battle an underground race of high-tech warriors.

**Jim Aikin: *The Wall at the Edge of the World*** Ace SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. In a telepathic society, kept peaceful by walls that keep the chaos and radiation outside and Cleansings that forcibly prevent unrest within, Danlo Ree discovers there is something else outside the walls . . . life.

**Dana Anderson, Ray Garton, and Charles de Lint: *Cafe Purgatorium*** Tor Horror, first time in pb, 288 pp, \$3.99. Three horror novellas. "Cafe Purgatorium" by Anderson, "Dr. Krusadian's Method" by Garton, and "Death Leaves an Echo" by de Lint.

**Isaac Asimov's *SF-Lite*** Ace SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. A selection of funny SF stories from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.

**Isaac Asimov and Roger MacBride Allen: *Caliban*** Ace SF, tp orig, 320 pp, \$9.95. Before his death Isaac Asimov conceived of the next step in robot evolution. Roger MacBride Allen tells the story of Caliban, an experimental robot without the restrictions of the Three Laws of Robotics . . . or compassion for humanity.

**Gael Baudino: *Maze of Moonlight*** Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99 Se-

quel to *Strands of Starlight*. Second in a four-book saga about the rise and fall and rise again of the Elven race.

**Gael Baudino: *Strands of Starlight*** Roc Fantasy, pb reiss, 376 pp, \$4.99.

**Elaine Bergstrom: *Tapestry of Dark Souls*** TSR Horror, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. The evil Gathering Cloth enshrouds many in its dark powers. One young man has the power to free the souls within, or destroy the cloth—and with it his cunning, undead father. Book five in a series of RAVENLOFT novels.

**David Bischoff: *Star Trek The Next Generation: Grounded*** Pocket Books, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. While answering a distress call, the *Enterprise* is infected with a crystalline virulike entity which transforms inorganic material.

**Terry Brooks: *The Tallmans of Shannara*** Del Rey Fantasy, hc, 416 pp, \$22.00. Book 4 of *The Heritage of Shannara*. In this final volume, Rimmer Dall, First Seeker of the Shadowen, plots to overrun the Four Lands with evil magic—and take Par Ohmsford's soul.

**Terry Brooks: *The Elf Queen of Shannara*** Del Rey Fantasy, first time in pb, 368 pp, \$5.99. Book 3 of *The Heritage of Shannara*.

**Terry Brooks: *The Druid of Shannara*** Del Rey Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. Book 2 of *The Heritage of Shannara*.

**Terry Brooks: *The Scions of Shannara*** Del Rey Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. Book 1 of *The Heritage of Shannara*.

**Steven Brust: *Agyar*** Tor Fantasy, hc, 256 pp, \$18.95. Death does not bind

Agyar. And when appears on the streets of a quiet college town in Ohio, he leaves a trail of magic, and blood, and broken hearts.

**Algis Budrys: *Hard Landing*** Questar SF, pb orig, 208 pp, \$4.99. In his first novel in 15 years, Algis Budrys tells the story of four stranded aliens who must learn to blend in with the primitive society they find on Earth.

**Orson Scott Card: *Monkey Sonatas*** Tor Fantasy, first time in pb, 320 pp, \$4.99. The fourth and last volume of *Maps in a Mirror*. A collection of ten of Card's fables and fantasy stories with introduction and notes by the author.

**Jonathan Carroll: *Outside the Dog Museum*** Bantam Books, first time in pb, 272 pp, \$4.99. Traversing the fine line between our world and an invisible world full of magic, a brilliant architect is hired by the Sultana of Saru to build a billion-dollar dog museum.

**Jo Clayton: *The Magic Wars*** DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.99. *Wild Magic* Book #3. In this final volume, Faan and her comrades confront the chaos of a sorcerous war which could destroy not just Faan's world, but all of the interlinked universes.

**Jo Clayton: *Wildfire*** DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.99. *Wild Magic* Book #2.

**Jo Clayton: *Wild Magic*** DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.99. *Wild Magic* Book #1.

**Molly Cochran and Warren Murphy: *The Forever King*** Tor Books, first time in pb, 416 pp, \$5.99. King

## Key to Abbreviations

**hc**: hardcover, almost always an original publication.

**pb orig**: paperback original, not published previously in any other format.

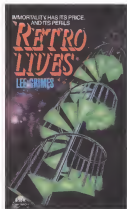
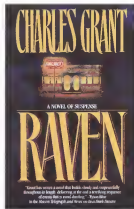
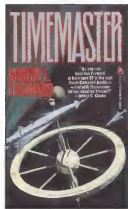
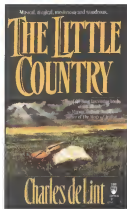
**pb reiss**: paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

**pb rep**: paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

**tr pb**: trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.





Arthur returns in modern times as a ten-year-old boy. With the help of a time-weakened Merlin and a washed-up ex-FBI agent they try to prevent the sorcerer Saladin from stealing the Holy Grail.

**Allan Cole and Chris Bunch: *Empire's End*** Del Rey SF, pb orig, 448 pp, \$4.99. The final Sten Adventure. Sten makes his last stand, turning against his master the Emperor to save his own skin ... and the Empire itself.

**Michelle Shirey Crean: *Dancer of the Sixth*** Del Rey Discovery SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$3.99. Dancer was a crack pilot in the intelligence service of the Confederacy. But her bravery and loyalty are tested when confronted with her long-buried past.

**Charles de Lint: *The Little Country*** Tor Fantasy, first time in pb, 608 pp, \$5.99. In an old trunk, folk musician Jancy Little finds a mysterious manuscript with true magic within its pages.

**Gordon R. Dickson: *Dorsai!*** Tor SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.99. The work that launched the *Childe Cycle*. The universe's ultimate mercenary soldiers are the planet Dorsai's chief export, and Donald Graeme is the finest of them all.

**Gordon R. Dickson: *Mindspan*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.99. Galactic overlords with stronger weapons force Earth's ambassador to abandon diplomacy in favor of human cunning.

**Gordon R. Dickson: *Sleepwalker's World*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. The core tap stations promised unlimited food and energy, but they delivered a nightmare of involuntary hypnotic sleep filled with terror.

**Carole Nelson Douglas: *Catnap*** Tor Mystery, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. A Midnight Louie mystery. The fur flies at the American Bookseller's Association convention when purrivate eye Midnight Louie investigates a murder.

**David Drake: *At Any Price*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.95. When Hammer's Slammer's are called in to support human colonists against a native alien uprising, they face not only blasters, but enemies who can teleport into battle and out again at will.

**David Drake and Bill Fawcett, editors: *Battlestation Book 2: Vanguard*** Ace SF, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. The ultimate space battlestation is under attack by the insectlike Ichton. Stories by David Drake and others.

**Diane Duane: *The Door into Sunset*** Tor Fantasy, hc, 384 pp, \$21.95. Book 3 in the *Tale of the Five*. Sequel to *The Door into Fire* and *The Door into Shadow*.

**Diane Duane: *The Door into Shadow*** Tor Fantasy, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99. Book 2 in the *Tale of the Five*.

**Kate Elliott: *An Earthly Crown*** DAW SF, pb orig, 592 pp, \$5.99. The first of a two-part sequel to *Jaran*. Earth-born Tess and her jaran husband lead his nomadic people on a campaign of conquest across the world of Rhui, while Tess's brother tries to win her aid in interstellar rebellion.

**Kate Elliott: *Jaran*** DAW SF, pb reiss, \$4.99. The first novel of the *Jaran* series.

**Robert L. Forward: *Timemaster*** Tor SF, first time in pb, 320 pp, \$5.99. A wealthy industrialist communicates with aliens, and achieves interstellar flight in a technologically advanced future.

**Steven Frankos: *The Jewel of the Equilibrant*** Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.50. When Matt Logan is sucked through a vortex to the land of Sparill, his one way back to California involves defeating the sorcerer Groatth to capture the fabled Jewel of Equilibrant.

**Mary Gentle: *The Architecture of Desire*** Viking/Roc Fantasy, hc, 240 pp, \$19.00. A tale of a husband-and-wife

team who must utilize their magic as two factions seek undisputed control of Renaissance London.

**Mary Gentle: *Rats and Gargoyles*** Roc Fantasy, pb reiss, 480 pp, \$5.99. In the mythic realm at the "heart of the world," where humankind is enslaved, the powerful White Crow organizes an uprising against the powers of chaos.

**Mary Gentle: *Ancient Light*** Roc Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99.

**Charles Grant: *Raven*** Tor Books, suspense hc, 256 pp, \$18.95. When a group of people are stranded in a diner by a blizzard, death stalks their company, seeking a sacrifice.

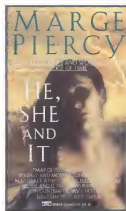
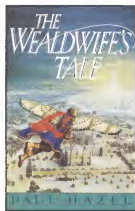
**Pat Graverson: *Black Ice*** Zebra Horror, pb orig, 356 pp, \$4.50. The angry souls of three little girls, murdered horribly seventy years ago, pursue an evil quest for vengeance.

**Sharon Green: *Silver Princess, Golden Knight*** AvoNova Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. The best shapeshifters will compete for the hand of Princess Alexia. But, though she vowed to best them all, treachery forces her to link power with one—or surrender to the forces of darkness.

**Simon R. Green: *Ghostworld*** Ace SF, pb orig, 192 pp, \$4.50. Sequel to *Mistworld*. When a distant mining colony breaks contact with the empire, Captain John Silence is sent to investigate, only to find that in the silent darkness, something is stirring.

**Martin Harry Greenberg, editor: *The Further Adventures of Batman II: Featuring Catwoman*** Bantam Books, pb orig, 480 pp, \$4.99. An all-new collection of Batman stories by Ed Gorman, Will Murray, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, and others.

**Lee Grimes: *Retro Lives*** AvoNova SF, pb orig, 208 pp, \$4.50. Due to a genetic glitch, Robert Widdick is doomed



to repeat his life endlessly. Each time he reaches the age of 60, he regresses back to 25, trapped in a nightmare.

**Harry Harrison: *Stainless Steel Visions*** Tor SF, hc, 256 pp, \$18.95. A collection of short stories by Harry Harrison, including the previously unpublished story, "The Golden Years of the Stainless Steel Rat."

**Simon Hawke: *The Inadequate Adept*** Questar Fantasy, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *The Reluctant Sorcerer*. Martin Brewster is trapped in a parallel universe with gossipy dragons, capitalist leprechauns, and an evil wizard who has captured his time machine.

**Paul Hazel: *The Wealdwife's Tale*** AvoNova Fantasy, hc, 304 pp, \$20.00. In a dark reimagining of a classic folk fable, a duke creates a flying machine to search the nearby magical wood for his missing wife . . . only to return with a new bride-to-be.

**Robert A. Heinlein: *Sixth Column*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. Six desperate men in a mountain laboratory/fortress in the Rocky Mountains are all that offer hope to save America from victorious invaders.

**Brian Jacques: *Mariel of Redwall*** AvoNova Fantasy, first time in pb, 400 pp, \$4.99. The innocent mousechild Mariel faces peril when she's cast overboard by the bloodthirsty pirate king of the Seatars.

**Peter James: *Twilight*** St. Martin's Horror, hc, 320 pp, \$19.95. When strange sounds come from a new grave, the distraught husband of the "deceased" petitions for exhumation, and journalist Kate Hemingway uncovers a macabre plot.

**William H. Keith, Jr.: *Warlords of Jupiter*** TSR SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$3.95. Invading alien machines force Earth's longtime enemy factions, NEO and RAM, to work together for the survival of the

human race. The concluding volume in the XXVc novel trilogy *Invasions of Charon*.

**Christopher Kubasik: *Battletech: Ideal War*** Roc SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. Book 9 in the *Battletech* series, based on the futuristic role-playing game. A veteran futurist in the art of BattleMech combat evaluates a backwater guerrilla war that emphasizes victory and body counts over honor and ideal war.

**Holly Lisle: *Bones of the Past*** Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *Fire in the Mist*. Medwind Song should have remembered the old Hoos proverb "Never dig up the bones of the past—because the past never dies, and it resents being buried."

**Holly Lisle: *Fire in the Mist*** Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 304 pp, \$4.99.

**George R. R. Martin, editor: *Wild Cards: Card Sharks*** Baen SF, pb orig, 512 pp, \$5.99. Book 1 of a new *Wild Cards* cycle. In a mosaic novel written by Roger Zelazny, Melinda M. Snodgrass, William F. Wu, Laura J. Mixon, Kevin Andrew Murphy, Victor Milan, Stephen Leigh, and Michael Cassutt, someone is trying to kill all the Jokers.

**Sharyn McCrumb: *Zombies of the Gene Pool*** Ballantine Mystery, first time in pb, \$4.99. Sequel to *Bimbos of the Death Sun*.

**Grant Naylor: *Red Dwarf 2: Better Than Life*** Roc SF, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. In this second adventure based on the popular British TV series, Lister is trapped in a computer game that people are dying to play . . . literally.

**Grant Naylor: *Red Dwarf*** Roc SF, pb reiss, 304 pp, \$4.99. A humorous sf novel based on the British TV series *Red Dwarf*.

**Doug Niles: *The Druid Queen*** TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. The High Queen of the Moonshae Isles must

rediscover her druidic powers when evil forces threaten her family, her goddess, and her realm. The last volume in the FORGOTTEN REALMS® *Druidhome Trilogy*.

**Andre Norton: *Uncharted Stars*** Roc SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$5.50. Sequel to *The Zero Stone*. Trader Murdoch and Eet the catlike alien seek Forerunner fortune along the uncharted fringes of inhabited space.

**Marge Piercy: *He, She and It*** Fawcett Crest, first time in pb, \$5.99. In a world ravaged by environmental disasters and divided into corporate enclaves, a woman returns to the town where she grew up and meets an extraordinary man who is a cyborg.

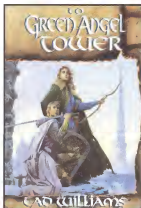
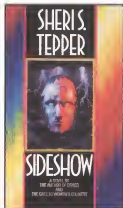
**Jerry Pournelle and S. M. Stirling: *Prince of Sparta*** Baen SF, pb orig, 416 pp, \$4.99. A novel of Falkenberg's Legion. Grand Senator Bronson's hatred of the Legion is as strong as ever, and he uses his wealth and high office to reform his terrorist horde for what he plans as a Final Solution.

**Jerry Pournelle: *Falkenberg's Legion*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 448 pp, \$4.99. Military genius John Christian Falkenberg believes mankind deserves a better fate than eternal bondage.

**Jerry Pournelle and S. M. Stirling: *Go Tell the Spartans*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$4.95. A novel of Falkenberg's Legion. As the CoDominium falls, mankind's hope rests on a planet called Sparta, where Falkenberg's Legion is training Spartans for the fight for liberty.

**Mike Resnick: *Paradise*** Tor SF, pb reiss, \$4.99.

**Mike Resnick: *Purgatory: A Chronicle of a Distant World*** Tor SF, hc, 320 pp, \$19.95. The sentient reptiles on the planet Karimon hadn't evolved beyond their Stone Age when the first shiploads of Men staked a claim to their virgin planet, but Men have enemies, too.



**Kenneth Robeson: *Flight Into Fear*** Spectra Adventure, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.99. In this Doc Savage novel, based on an unpublished manuscript by the series creator, Doc battles the beautiful and infamous Red Lady, a master of disguise and mistress of pain.

**Spider Robinson: *Mindkiller*** Ace SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. In the near future, the search for ultimate pleasure leads to mind control, which brings ecstasy . . . and death.

**Nina Romberg: *Shadow Walkers*** Pinnacle Horror, pb orig, 416 pp, \$4.50. An ancient force claims the souls of innocents—runaway children living in an abandoned mental hospital deep in the East Texas woods.

**Robert Silverberg: *Kingdoms of the Wall*** Spectra SF, hc, 320 pp, \$22.50. A new quest novel by the winner of five Nebula and four Hugo Awards.

**L. Neil Smith: *The Crystal Empire*** Tor SF, pb reiss, 464 pp, \$4.50.

**Christopher Stasheff: *A Wizard in Absentia*** Ace SF, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. In a spin-off to the Warlock series, Magnus, son of the Lord High Warlock Rod Gallowglass and the Most Powerful Witch Gwendolyn, sets off across the galaxy in search of fame and fortune.

**Judith Tarr: *Lord of the Two Lands*** Tor Books, hc, 320 pp, \$19.95. A historical novel about Alexander the Great and his move into Egypt, where he was said to be destined by the gods to be Pharaoh.

**Sheri S. Tepper: *Sideshow*** Spectra SF, first time in pb, 432 pp, \$5.99. A novel that explores the sociological ramifications of intervention in galactic politics, as a small band of human Enforcers strive to identify if complete tolerance is ever evil.

**Sheri S. Tepper: *The Gate to Women's Country*** Spectra SF, pb reiss,

\$5.99. Human civilization has evolved into a dual society: Women's Country, where walled towns enclose what's left of civilization, and the adjacent garrisons where warrior men live.

**Sheri S. Tepper: *Grass*** Spectra SF, pb reiss, \$5.99. The apparently idyllic world of Grass is the only planet which has escaped a deadly plague spreading across the stars. But the planet's mysteries hide a shattering truth.

**Sheri S. Tepper: *After Long Silence*** Spectra SF, pb reiss, \$5.99. Though humankind has colonized Jubal, the massive crystal Presences there restrict travel and technology. It must be determined whether the Presences are intelligent, before they are destroyed.

**Sheri S. Tepper: *Beauty*** Spectra SF, pb reiss, \$5.99. To sidestep a curse that will afflict her on her sixteenth birthday, Beauty embarks on an adventure with vast consequences involving danger to the enchanted places of the world.

**Sheri S. Tepper: *Raising The Stones*** Spectra SF, pb reiss, \$5.99.

**Lawrence Watt-Evans: *Taking Flight*** Del Rey Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. Book 5 in the *Ethsar* series. While on the Great Highway, Kelder meets and falls in love with a young girl who can fly. Discovering her secrets is his greatest adventure.

**Becky Lee Weyrich: *Whispers in Time*** Pinnacle Historical Romance, pb orig, 480 pp, \$4.99. A renowned psychic is in New Orleans on police business—until an enchanted midnight bayou ride sends her back in time.

**Tad Williams: *To Green Angel Tower*** DAW Fantasy, hc, 1040 pp, \$25.00. Book 3 of *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*. The call of battle leads the followers of Josua Lockhead to the haunted halls of the stronghold of the undead Sithi.

**Tad Williams: *The Dragonbone***

**Chair** DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. Book 1 of *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*. The High King's death unleashes a war fueled by the dark powers of sorcery, as the undead ruler of the Sithi, seeks to regain his lost realm.

**Tad Williams: *Stone of Farewell*** DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. Book 2 of *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*. The tattered remnants of the human army seeks a rallying point—the Stone of Farewell, a sanctuary shrouded in mystery and ancient sorrow.

**Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy:** St. Martin's Press, nonfiction, tp orig, 272 pp, \$8.95. A collection of articles and essays by noted authors, on writing SF and fantasy, compiled by the editors of *Analog* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.

**Chelsea Quinn Yarbro: *Darker Jewels*** Tor Fantasy, hc, 336 pp, \$19.95. The Count Saint-Germain, personal envoy of King Stephan Bathory of Poland, is sent to the court of Ivan the Terrible.

**Timothy Zahn: *Star Wars Volume 2: Dark Force Rising*** Bantam SF, first time in pb, 432 pp, \$5.99. Sequel to *Heir to the Empire*. While Han Solo and Lando Calrissian race against time to find the traitor in the highest Republic Council, a new Dark Jedi is scheming to corrupt Luke Skywalker to the Dark Side.

**Roger Zelazny and Robert Sheckley: *If at Faust You Don't Succeed*** Spectra Fantasy, tp orig, 320 pp, \$12.00. Sequel to *Bring Me the Head of Prince Charming*. A diabolical comedy about life, death, Heaven, Hell . . . and eternal bureaucracy.

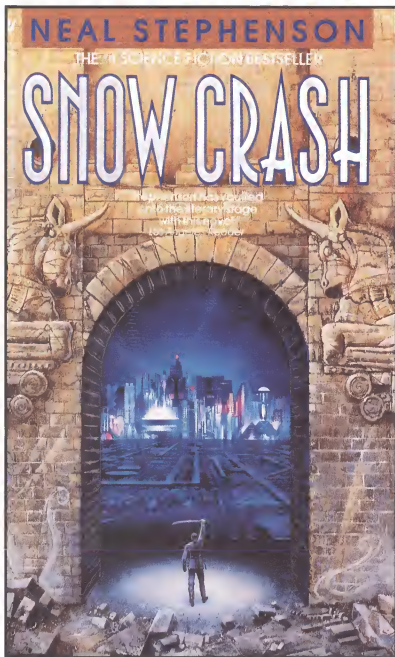
*Publishers of science fiction, fantasy, and horror books are invited to contribute material to this listing. For more information, contact Bill Fawcett & Associates, 388 Hickory Road, Lake Zurich IL 60047.*

Looking Forward:

# Snow Crash

by Neal Stephenson

Coming in April 1993 from Bantam Books



Cover art by Jensen

*Introduction by Bill Fawcett*

Many of the best near-future science fiction novels have one characteristic in common: they paint a picture of the world to come that is bleak and foreboding, but at the same time so exciting that you almost wish things would turn out the way the author is describing them.

*Snow Crash* is just such a book, weaving black humor and high technology and dozens of other items and concepts into a disturbing and thrilling story centered around one Hiro Protagonist, who gets caught up in trying to stop a virtual villain from bringing about Infocalypse.

This excerpt, from the beginning of the book, introduces the reader to Hiro and explains what he does for a living—a job that's certainly a sign of the times.

The Deliverator belongs to an elite order, a hallowed subcategory. He's got esprit up to here. Right now, he is preparing to carry out his third mission of the night. His uniform is black as activated charcoal, filtering the very light out of the air. A bullet will bounce off its arachnofiber weave like a wren hitting a patio door, but excess perspiration wafts

through it like a breeze through a freshly napalmed forest. Where his body has bony extremities, the suit has sintered armor: feels like gritty jello, protects like a stack of telephone books.

When they gave him the job, they gave him a gun. The Deliverator never deals in cash, but someone might come after him anyway—might want his car, or his cargo. The gun is tiny, aero-styled, lightweight, the kind of gun a fashion designer would carry; it fires teensy darts that fly at five times the velocity of an SR-71 spy plane, and when you get done using it, you have to plug it into the cigarette lighter, because it runs on electricity.

The Deliverator never pulled that gun in anger, or in fear. He pulled it once in Gila Highlands. Some punks in Gila Highlands, a fancy Burbclave, wanted themselves a delivery, and they didn't want to pay for it. Thought they would impress the Deliverator with a baseball bat. The Deliverator took out his gun, centered its laser doohickey on that poised Louisville Slugger, fired it. The recoil was immense, as though the weapon had blown up in his hand. The middle third of the baseball bat tumbled into a column of burning sawdust accelerating in all directions like a bursting star. Punk ended up holding this bat handle with milky smoke pouring out the end. Stupid look on his face. Didn't get nothing but trouble from the Deliverator.

Since then the Deliverator has kept the gun in the glove compartment and relied, instead, on a matched set of samurai swords, which have always been his weapon of choice anyhow. The punks in Gila Highlands weren't afraid of the gun, so the Deliverator was forced to use it. But swords need no demonstrations.

The Deliverator's car has enough potential energy packed into its batteries to fire a pound of bacon into the Asteroid Belt. Unlike a bimbo box or a Burb beater, the Deliverator's car unloads that power through gaping, gleaming, polished sphincters. When the Deliverator puts the hammer down, shit happens. You want to talk contact patches? You car's tires have tiny contact patches, talk to the asphalt in four places the size of your tongue. The Deliverator's car has big sticky tires with contact patches the size of a fat lady's thighs. The Deliverator is in touch with the road, starts like a bad day, stops on a peseta.

Why is the Deliverator so equipped? Because people rely on him. He is a roll model. This is America. People do whatever the fuck they feel like doing, you got a problem with that? Because they have a right to. And because they have guns and no one can fucking stop them. As a result, this country has one of the worst economies in the world. When it gets down to it—talking trade balances here—once we've brain-drained all our technology into other countries, once things have evened out, they're making cars in Bolivia and microwave ovens in Tadjhikistan and selling them here—once our edge in natural resources has been made irrelevant by giant Hong Kong ships and dirigibles that can ship North Dakota all the way to New Zealand for a nickel—once the Invisible Hand has taken all those historical inequities and smeared them out into a broad

global layer of what a Pakistani brickmaker would consider to be prosperity—y'know what? There's only four things we do better than anyone else

music  
movies  
microcode (software)  
high-speed pizza delivery

The Deliverator used to make software. Still does, sometimes. But if life were a mellow elementary school run by well-meaning education Ph.D.s, the Deliverator's report card would say: "Hiro is so bright and creative but needs to work harder on his cooperation skills."

So now he has this other job. No brightness or creativity involved—but no cooperation either. Just a single principle: The Deliverator stands tall, your pie in thirty minutes or you can have it free, shoot the driver, take his car, file a class-action suit. The Deliverator has been working this job for six months, a rich and lengthy tenure by his standards, and has never delivered a pizza in more than twenty-one minutes.

Oh, they used to argue over times, many corporate driver-years lost to it: hometowners, red-faced and sweaty with their own lies, stinking of Old Spice and job-related stress, standing in their glowing yellow doorways brandishing their Seikos and waving at the clock over the kitchen sink, I swear, can't you guys tell time?

Didn't happen anymore. Pizza delivery a major industry. A managed industry. People went to CosaNostra Pizza University four years just to learn it. Came in its doors unable to write an English sentence, from Abkhazia, Rwanda, Guanajuato, South Jersey, and came out knowing more about pizza than a Bedouin knows about sand. And they had studied this problem. Graphed the frequency of doorway delivery-time disputes. Wired the early Deliverators to record, then analyze, the debating tactics, the voice-stress histograms, the distinctive grammatical structures employed by white middle-class Type A Burbclave occupants who against all logic had decided that this was the place to take their personal Custerian stand against all that was stale and deadening in their lives; they were going to lie, or delude themselves, about the time of their phone call and get themselves a free pizza; no, they deserved a free pizza along with their life, liberty, and pursuit of whatever, it was fucking inalienable. Sent psychologists out to these people's houses, gave them a free TV set to submit to an anonymous interview, hooked them to polygraphs, studied their brain waves as they showed them choppy, inexplicable movies of porn queens and late-night car crashes and Sammy Davis, Jr., put them in sweet-smelling, mauve-walled rooms and asked them questions about Ethics so perplexing that even a Jesuit couldn't respond without committing a venial sin.

The analysts at CosaNostra Pizza University concluded that it was just human nature and you couldn't fix it, and so they went for a quick cheap technical fix: smart boxes. The pizza box is a plastic carapace now, corrugated for stiffness, a little LED readout glowing on the



side, telling the Deliverator how many trade imbalance-producing minutes have ticked away since the fateful phone call. There are chips and stuff in there. The pizzas rest, a short stack of them, in slots behind the Deliverator's head. Each pizza glides into a slot like a circuit board into a computer, clicks into place as the smart box interfaces with the onboard system of the Deliverator's car. The address of the caller has already been inferred from his phone number and poured into the smart box's built-in RAM. From there it is communicated to the car, which computes and projects the optimal route on a heads-up display, a glowing colored map traced out against the windshield so that the Deliverator does not even have to glance down.

If the thirty-minute deadline expires, news of the disaster is flashed to CosaNostra Pizza Headquarters and relayed from there to Uncle Enzo himself—the Sicilian Colonel Sanders, the Andy Griffith of Bensonhurst, the straight razor-swinging figment of many a Deliverator's nightmares, the Capo and prime figurehead of CosaNostra Pizza, Incorporated—who will be on the phone to the customer within five minutes, apologizing profusely. The next day, Uncle Enzo will land on the customer's yard in a jet helicopter and apologize some more and give him a free trip to Italy—all he has to do is sign a bunch of releases that make him a public figure and spokesperson for CosaNostra Pizza and basically end his private life as he knows it. He will come away from the whole thing feeling that, somehow, he owes the Mafia a favor.

The Deliverator does not know for sure what happens to the driver in such cases, but he has heard some rumors. Most pizza deliveries happen to be in the evening hours, which Uncle Enzo considers to be his private time. And how would you feel if you had to interrupt dinner with your family in order to call some obstreperous dork and grovel for a late fucking pizza? Uncle Enzo has not put in fifty years serving his family and his country so that, at the age when most are playing golf and bobbling their granddaughters, he can get out of the bathtub dripping wet and pie down and kiss the feet of some sixteen-year-old skate punk whose pepperoni was thirty-one minutes in coming. Oh, God. It makes the Deliverator a little shallower just to think of the idea.

But he wouldn't drive for CosaNostra Pizza any other way. You know why? Because there's something about having your life on the line. It's like being a kamikaze pilot. Your mind is clear. Other people—store clerks, burger flippers, software engineers, the whole vocabulary of meaningless jobs that make up Life in America—other people just rely on plain old competition. Better flip your burgers or debug your subroutines faster and better than your high school classmate two blocks down the strip is flipping or debugging, because we're in competition with those guys, and people notice these things.

What a fucking rat race that is. CosaNostra Pizza doesn't have any competition. Competition goes against

the Mafia ethic. You don't work harder because you're competing against some identical operation down the street. You work harder because everything is on the line. Your name, your honor, your family, your life. Those burger flippers might have a better life expectancy—but what kind of life is it anyway, you have to ask yourself. That's why nobody, not even the Nipponese, can move pizzas faster than CosaNostra. The Deliverator is proud to wear the uniform, proud to drive the car, proud to march up the front walks of innumerable Burb-clave homes, a grim vision in ninja black, a pizza on his shoulder, red LED lights blazing proud numbers into the night: 12:32 or 15:15 or the occasional 20:43.

The Deliverator is assigned to CosaNostra Pizza #3569 in the Valley. Southern California doesn't know whether to bustle or just strangle itself on the spot. Not enough roads for the number of people. Fairlanes, Inc., is laying new ones all the time. Have to bulldoze lots of neighborhoods to do it, but those seventies and eighties developments exist to be bulldozed, right? No sidewalks, no schools, no nothing. Don't have their own police force—no immigration control—undesirables can walk right in without being frisked or even harassed. Now a Burbclave, that's the place to live. A city-state with its own constitution, a border, laws, cops, everything.

The Deliverator was a corporal in the Farms of Merryvale State Security Force for a while once. Got himself fired for pulling a sword on an acknowledged perp. Slid it right through the fabric of the perp's shirt, gliding the flat of the blade along the base of his neck, and pinned him to a warped and bubbled expanse of vinyl siding on the wall of the house that the perp was trying to break into. Thought it was a pretty righteous bust. But they fired him anyway because the perp turned out to be the son of the vice-chancellor of the Farms of Merryvale. Oh, the weasels had an excuse: said that a thirty-six-inch samurai sword was not on their Weapons Protocol. Said that he had violated the SPAC, the Suspected Perpetrator Apprehension Code. Said that the perp had suffered psychological trauma. He was afraid of butter knives now; he had to spread his jelly with the back of a teaspoon. They said that he had exposed them to liability.

The Deliverator had to borrow some money to pay for it. Had to borrow it from the Mafia, in fact. So he's in their database now—retinal patterns, DNA, voice graph, fingerprints, footprints, palm prints, wrist prints, every fucking part of the body that had wrinkles on it—almost—those bastards rolled in ink and made a print and digitized it into their computer. But it's their money—sure they're careful about loaning it out. And when he applied for the Deliverator job they were happy to take him, because they knew him. When he got the loan, he had to deal personally with the assistant vice-capo of the Valley, who later recommended him for the Deliverator job. So it was like being in a family. A really scary, twisted, abusive family. ♦





# CONTACT

Cultures of the Imagination (COTI)

You are invited to support an exciting learning project designed to teach worldbuilding and culture creation. During the past eight years, CONTACT simulations by top writers, scientists, artists and educators have proven the ability of "COTI" to promote interdisciplinary understanding.

Now, through "COTI jr," CONTACT brings science fiction literature to young people through an intermediate school curriculum

based on CONTACT exercises. The "COTI jr" pilot project has been given seed funding by the Smithsonian Institution to help children create their own CONTACT and bring alternative futures to life in their classrooms.

Your \$15 contribution to CONTACT will help underwrite educational projects like "COTI jr." It will also bring you our newsletter and keep you in touch with the annual CONTACT conference.

**Yes!**  
I want to make  
**CONTACT**



Mail this completed coupon and your check payable to CONTACT:  
Greg Barr, CONTACT  
1412 Potomac Ave. SE  
Washington DC 20003

CONTACT: Cultures of the Imagination  
(R) is a California non-profit educational  
and scientific corporation organized  
under IRS Code 501(c) (3)

- ☐ I have enclosed \$15 for 4 issues of the Newsletter.  
☐ I am also sending a tax-deductible contribution of \$ \_\_\_\_\_.  
☐ I can't contribute right now. I've enclosed a self-addressed envelope (1 oz.), please send information on CONTACT.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Looking Forward:

# A Wizard in Absentia

by Christopher Stasheff

Coming in March 1993 from Ace Books



*Introduction by Bill Fawcett*

In a future era, what do you do for excitement if your father is a warlock and your mother a witch? You put Fess, your father's robotic companion, into a spaceship and go see the galaxy. Along the way you run into a few problems that only your magical abilities can solve.

In what may be one of the best books in the Warlock series, we follow the exploits of the Warlock's oldest son, Magnus Gal-lowglass. There's adventure and intrigue as he uncovers a plot that threatens his home planet of Gramarye . . . and some episodes that feature more of the dry and not so dry humor that characterizes the series, such as the following excerpt.

"Seal the hatch when I've stepped through it," Magnus told Herkimer, "and don't open it for anyone but me."

"Confirmed," Herkimer answered. Then some data from Fess's memory banks must have nudged him, because he said, "I hope you won't do anything rash, Magnus."

"Never fear," Magnus assured him. "Everything I do will be well thought out." And he stepped through the hatch, intent on a very well-considered and thoroughly planned drunk.

He paced through the boarding tunnel and out into the concourse. He looked about him, dazed by the dazzle and glitter of advertising messages and direction signs. A circle of gambling machines filled the rotunda, and asteroid miners and merchant crews and passengers came pounding off their ships to start feeding credit cards into the slots of the mechanical bandits. A 30-degree arc of the rotunda wall was taken up by a mammoth bar, and young and

Cover art by Ciruelo Cabral

Text of excerpt copyright ©1993 Christopher Stasheff

shapely men and women strolled around the edges of the crowd in tight-fitting body suits in dark colors. As Magnus watched, one young woman's suit suddenly turned transparent around her right breast. She glanced down at it, then up toward a man who was staring at her. The body suit turned opaque again, but another circle turned transparent, highlighting a different portion of her anatomy. Smiling, she strolled toward her prospective customer, hips rolling. Magnus glanced about and saw that the others who were similarly clad were developing transparent circles that came and went in response to the stares of the passersby. If it was like this in the spaceport area, what would it be like in the corridors of the city proper?

Magnus felt his hormones stir at the display of dancing circles, and turned away just in time to avoid a young woman who was homing in on him. Feeling slightly sick, he stepped over to the bar, ordered a shot of straight grain whiskey, paid for it with one of the coins his cousins had given him, drank it straight down, and turned to follow the signs that promised a way out.

"Hey, fella, what'cha lookin' up?"

Magnus turned, surprised. Could someone really be talking to him?

It was a slender youth with shortish hair and very old eyes, fine-boned features, and a sinuous walk inside a body suit which was, fortuitously, totally opaque. "Saw y' walk away from the skirt, pard. Interested in a little something else?"

It came to Magnus that he was being propositioned. He felt that odd sort of locking within him, and his face went neutral. "I thank you, no. My plans for the evening are already fixed."

"Tightwad," the young man said contemptuously. His left hip went suddenly transparent. He glanced at it, then up on a line with it, and saw a matronly-looking, lumpy woman with hot eyes. Instantly forgetting Magnus, he strolled toward her.

The sickness settled by the whiskey rose again, and Magnus followed the signs down the concourse and through the automatic iris that passed for a door.

The corridor was ten times what the concourse had been, except that the businesses themselves were hidden by partitions with doors. Floating glare-signs and moving, three-dimensional displays lined the sides of the broad thoroughfare, providing very clear what sort of goods or services were purveyed behind each door. In the center, overhead, dancing displays advertised various brands of products. Magnus was overwhelmed by simple profusion—and by the decadence of it all. Suddenly, he was glad that he had begun his introduction to modern civilization with the much smaller-scale milieu of Maxima. He had studied all of this in Fess's data banks and 3DT displays, and it had prepared him for this, but not enough—the physical reality of it was stupefying.

So cut it down to size. He took the first display that showed liquor pouring from an antique bottle into a glass, and went through the door.

There was a bar against one wall, tables and chairs in the center, and a line of closed booths against the far

wall. Magnus could only imagine what went on in such privacy, and from the moans and gasps, he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Looking at the displays behind the bar, he realized why—there were at least as many drugs on display as there were liquors.

"Name your poison," said the man with the smoking dope-stick and traditional sleeve-garters, and Magnus didn't doubt that he meant it. He scanned the bottles and pointed to something in a fluorescent purple. "That one."

"Aldebaran Bouncer?" The man shrugged. "Your life, citizen." He punched a combination on the machine in front of him. "Thumbprint." A glowing square appeared in front of Magnus, and he rolled the ball of his thumb across it. Didn't they need to see the card? Apparently not; the bartender nodded, satisfied, and took a brimming glass from the machine. He set it in front of Magnus.

Magnus stared; he hadn't known it would be so large.

"Smatter? Don't like it?"

Magnus shrugged, hoisted the tumbler, and drank. It seared his throat, and he could feel the fire all the way down into his belly, but it felt good somehow, burning away the shame that had soiled him within. He set the glass down, inhaled long and hard, and found the bartender staring at him. Magnus caught his breath, nodded, and said, "Good. Another."

The bartender shook himself, shrugged, and said, "Your funeral. Thumb it again."

Magnus rolled his thumb, and the bartender set another livid purple glass in front of him. Magnus took a bit longer with this one—it must have lasted two minutes. As he lowered the empty, he looked up to see the bartender watching him with a speculative look. "A girl?"

"Several of them." Magnus pushed the empty glass toward him.

"Several!" The bartender snorted. "Lucky bozo! I'm doing good to get turned down by one! Thumb it."

Magnus rolled his thumb across the plate and settled down to a single swallow at a time. He was beginning to feel numb inside, and that was good, very good. He studied the people around him, and found that a disconcerting number of them seemed to be looking his way. He scowled and locked stares with them, straightening to his full height, and one by one, they found something more interesting to look at—

Except for one man—in his thirties, at a guess—who was nowhere nearly as tall as Magnus but had arms far longer than they should have been, and shoulders to match. He grinned back into Magnus's glare and shuffled over toward him.

"Hey now, Orange!" the bartender snapped. "Let the kid alone."

"Alone?" Orange stepped up close, grinning up at Magnus. "I wouldn't think of it. You peaceable, kid?"

Magnus recognized a push for a fight when he saw one. Joy lit within him—at least it was something clean! "Orange?" he said. "What sort of name is that?"

"Short for 'orangutan.' Wanna make something of it?"

"Juice," Magnus said.

"Not in here!" the bartender yelled.

Orange grinned around at the crowd. "You're all my witnesses—he tried to put the squeeze on me." He lifted his hands, balling them into fists.

The bartender lifted *his* hand—with a nasty-looking little blaster in it. "Out!"

"Why, how inhospitable," Magnus murmured. "But I was never one to stay where I wasn't wanted." He turned away to the door. Behind him, Orange grunted, "Then how come you're still on Ceres?"

"You don't want me, then?" Magnus said as he stepped through the door and pivoted about.

"Just for a target," Orange snapped, as his fist slammed into Magnus's midriff.

Magnus rolled back, not quite fast enough; the punch hurt, and for a few seconds his breath was blocked. But he caught Orange's fist, sidestepped, and yanked, and sent the shorter man sprawling into the wall of spectators, of whom there seemed to be an increasing number—and two of them were moving from person to person, punching the keys of their noteboards. Several of the bystanders obligingly shoved Orange back on his feet, and he snarled, leaping in and out, feinting, then slamming a quick combination of punches at Magnus's belly and jaw. The second shot at the face clipped Magnus on the cheek; he recoiled and ducked around and in, under Orange's next punch, and up, hauling him by his shirt-front and throwing him. But one of those long arms snaked out and snagged itself on Magnus's neck, throwing him off balance and pulling him down. Magnus stumbled into a fist, staggered back as two more hit him, then caught the third and threw Orange away, shaking his head to clear it and seeing two copies of the human gorilla as he stepped back in, hand grabbing at a flat pocket against his hip . . .

. . . and coming out with a knife that flicked open, its blade glowing.

Magnus stepped back, recognizing a force-blade from its descriptions. The cleanliness of punch and pain was suddenly soiled, but not much, for he parried the arm with the blade twice, then caught the wrist with his right hand and slammed an elbow back into Orange's solar plexus. The shorter man doubled over, gagging; Magnus twisted the blade out of his grip and backhanded him on the side of the head. Orange stumbled into the cheering spectators—there were three times as many of them now, and four men with noteboards moving among them. The nearest watchers obligingly shoved Orange out again. He was game, he swung at Magnus even now, but the young giant blocked the clumsy punch easily and smalled a right to his jaw. Orange folded and slumped to the ground.

Magnus stood, staring down at the man, teeth bared in a grin, heaving deep breaths. He reached down and hauled Orange to his feet with a surge of fellow-feeling. "Good fighting, friend. I'll stand you to the next drink."

"If he can stand to drink," someone said, but Orange only snarled and shoved Magnus away, then tottered back toward the bar. Magnus was about to go after him when he realized he was hearing a high, shrill sound, and the men with the noteboards stopped their collecting and paying off to call, "Peace-ers!"

The crowd melted on the instant, leaving Magnus standing alone, looking about him, startled.

"Time to disappear, friend," said one of the men as he passed, stuffing his noteboard into one pocket and currency into another.

Magnus took his advice and hurried away. Glancing back, he saw an armed and uniformed man with a pack on his back, floating through the air and descending toward the bar where Magnus had just been.

Another man with a noteboard passed in the other direction, punching numbers and advising, "Stay out in the open, and the bystanders will point you out to the Peace-ers. Better find another bar, pal."

Magnus did. He found three more. And three more fights. He was drawing larger and larger crowds, and more and more of the little men with the noteboards—until the last fight turned into a full-fledged brawl. That was when he found the Peace-ers. Or they found him.

He didn't remember it, though. He only remembered ducking, but not fast enough, and the fist exploding in his face.

Then he was coming to, his head and chest one huge ache. He tried to sit up, which was a definite mistake, because his stomach suddenly convulsed, and everything he had downed the night before started back up.

Someone shoved a bucket under his face and growled, "In here, slob. I'm not cleaning up after you."

Magnus was horrendously sick for what seemed an inordinately long time. When his stomach finally stopped contracting, he managed to straighten up and lean back against something very hard, fumbling out a handkerchief and wiping his face, feeling much better inside but very, very shaky.

"Improved," someone said critically, and Magnus looked up to see a uniform with a face at the top. Over the breast pocket were the letters "E.D.G.A.R."

"Go 'way, Edgar," he groaned. "Come back for m' funeral."

"That's not the way you check out of here, pal," the guard said, "and the name's not 'Edgar.'"

Magnus frowned, trying to make sense out of that. "Says so on y'r pocket."

The guard's face came closer, frowning. "Boy, you *are* from out of town, aren't you? E.D.G.A.R. stands for the Eleusinian Drinking and Gambling Addiction Reformatory." ♦

# In the Kingdom of Teeth

Ian McDowell

I was rubbing cedar oil into my mother's preserved head when someone knocked at the door. Stuffing the rag I'd been using into her mouth, I put the head back into its teakwood chest, locked the chest with the bronze key I kept on a cord about my neck, and threw a sheepskin over it. That would suffice, I hoped, to keep her quiet, for I didn't want it known that I'd brought this charming ancestral custom with me to Camelot. Not that Morgawse would ever have been very welcome here, even when she was alive.

I opened the door. Sunlight lanced in through a narrow window set in the tower's stairwell, casting a dust-filled halo around Guinevere and highlighting her glorious hair.



Illustration by Peter Botsis

Over her shoulder loomed her maid Regan, a big, strapping woman whose sour manner and plain black robe always made me think she should have been a nun.

"Hello, Gwen," I said, smiling. I'd only been at court a few months, but I already knew the Queen-to-be well enough to address her with such informality. Well, she was like that; no ceremony for Guinevere, not when it could be avoided. Truth to tell, she was my only real friend here other than my brother Gawain, who was currently up north with his squadron, making sure the Picts kept to their side of the Wall.

"Good morning, Mordred," she said in the lilting tones of the Summer Country. Lugh and Jesus, but she was beautiful, with a high-cheeked triangle of a face, clear pale skin, creamy rather than freckled like most red-heads, and the greenest eyes I'd ever seen. I found myself once more envying Arthur his upcoming wedding.

"I'd like to talk to you," she said, breaking my reverie.

"Of course." I stepped back and motioned her into the circular chamber, where Merlin's sanctum, mine now that he was dead.

"Not here. Meet me in the amphitheater after tierce. We can play chess, and I'll have Regan bring wine and cheese for us."

The idea seemed not to sit well with Regan, who made a low sound not unlike a mastiff growling in its sleep. She didn't like me, resenting my easy familiarity with her mistress. Guinevere and I both ignored her.

"All right, then. I'll see you there. You owe me a chance to redeem myself." Gwen was a wicked chess player, and had humiliated me on more than one occasion.

"Thanks, love." With that, she was off down the staircase, Regan lumbering after her.

It may seem odd that we were on such good terms. In one month, she'd be Arthur's queen, assuming the wedding didn't suffer yet another delay while he went off to rebuild the Saxon shore defenses, fight the Picts or Irish, or bully some local king into paying his taxes. As a bastard, my only chance at the crown was for Arthur to directly name me heir, which had never been very likely, but would become even less so if Guinevere bore him a son. Yet friends we were, and had been since almost the first day we met.

Perhaps it was because Guinevere had apparently received a fairly good education after being bundled off to a convent in Brittany. I'd learned the trivium and quadrivium from my mother, who had harbored delusions of being Roman rather than half-druid witch she was, while Gwen had endured having reading and rhetoric drummed into her by surprisingly literate nuns, but the results were much the same. With Merlin gone, I was the only person with whom she could share the burden of her learning.

For all her easy manner, there had been a note of genuine concern in her voice. What could be the matter; some distressing news from Arthur? I'd know soon enough.

Camelot lies amid the wide meadows and low rolling hills of southern Gwent, where the Usk winds its way between the ragged Cambrian Mountains to the valley country at the Severn's broad mouth. The fortress proper

is built on the grounds of the old legion camp of Isca Silurum. Restoration of the earthworks and the stone and timber palisade began in Uther's day, and a four-story, white-washed palace now rises above the foundation of the old *praetorium*, while to the southeast, a bustling town has grown up on the site of the original civilian settlement. Within the walls of the fortress proper, Arthur has continued and improved upon Uther's renovations, even bringing in artisans from the continent to repair the bathhouse and the aqueduct. The drains, sewers and culverts are now all in good repair, and the plumbing actually works in the large legion latrine, which means that the fortress smells rather better than the town.

The amphitheater just outside the southeast wall is still a ruined shell, however, with the bleachers and other wooden facilities long gone and the central field now just a circular green meadow. Its dilapidated state is something I've never understood; Arthur's not the type for games or blood sports, but it would make a fine parade ground and drilling field. Despite this, he perversely prefers to train his men in the muddled purlieus to the west, saying that they'll have to fight in muck often enough, so they might as well drill in it. And so the amphitheater remains a grassy bowl rimmed by broken grey and brown stones. Pass it on a summer's night and you'd probably hear the low rhythmic sounds of love-making coming from the shadowed hollow, for couples often sneak there from the palace or the town, to lie together on the cool grass under a veil of stars; warriors, lords and commoners screwing within a dozen paces of each other and happily unmindful of the company.

But this was the afternoon, and we were alone except for Regan, who knitted in the sunlight some ways off, sitting on a tumbled piece of masonry and glaring at me when Guinevere wasn't looking. Gwen and I lounged on a blanket in the shade of the crumbly wall, eating pears and smoked goat cheese and dry brown bread, sipping watered wine and playing chess. She was wearing an emerald gown that left her pale arms bare, and there were green and gold ribbons in her flaming hair.

She took my queen with a knight to whom I'd not paid enough attention, deftly putting me once again in check. "Mate, I think."

"Bloody hell." My position did look grim. If I'd been playing anyone else, I'd have thrown the pretty little teak board against the wall by now. That thought must have shown on my face.

"Ach," she said gently, "now I've done it. I hope your wounded male pride won't keep you from giving me the benefit of your wisdom." Despite her loveliness, her features were slightly irregular, and when she smiled, her mouth turned crooked, becoming what I couldn't help thinking of as a lopsided fuck-me grin.

I cut off a slice of cheese and fruit and handed it to her. "Come on, you know I'm not as graceless as that. If I resented your winning I'd have stopped playing you long ago. What is it that you need?"

She nibbled daintily on her wedge of fruit and cheese. Her teeth were among the whitest I'd ever seen, second only to those of one of Arthur's warriors, a Spanish mer-



cenary who gargled each morning with his own piss. Her breath was rather better than his, though.

"Advice, really. Do you know much about the Otherworld?"

Now why was she asking that? "A little," I said non-committally.

"Your mother was a sorceress, wasn't she?"

I stared into those big green eyes, which gave away no more of what she was thinking than a cat's eyes do. "Yes. For all the good it did her."

She sighed. "Mine too, and it didn't do her much good, either. I think it was magic that killed her in the end. Was that what killed yours?"

I plucked a bluebell from the grass and pretended to look at it. "No. Her husband killed her."

"Your father?"

I began to get irritated. "Come on, Gwen, you know who my father is. Everybody knows. I said her husband. King Lot."

She took my hand. "That's why he's dead now, isn't it?"

"Yes." I'd helped a bit with that.

She hadn't let go of my hand. Hers was soft, but with a surprisingly firm grip. "You can talk about it, you know. To me, I mean. I know it must be difficult to speak of it around Arthur."

I squeezed her palm. "This isn't what you wanted to talk about. You were asking about the Otherworld."

She let go then, which was a relief, for I found her touch uncomfortably exciting. "When I was a little girl in Castle Cadbury, my mother saved my teeth each time I lost one."

I laughed. "What, for the fairies? I thought only peasants did that."

She frowned. "Everyone in that part of the Summer Country did that. They'd save their children's teeth and bury them, usually in some mound or hillock. It was supposed to bring them good luck and a long life. The practice was so common, the monks at Glastonbury forbade anyone to bury teeth in the tor, saying the place was too holy to be defiled with pagan custom."

I snorted. "Glastonbury was a place of power long before there was a chapel there."

Gwen nodded. "I know. Anyway, my mother was different. She wasn't trying to bring me a long life or good health. She was trying to buy them for herself."

"Oh." This sounded darker than I'd first assumed.

"It's best I just tell the whole story," she continued.

"One day when I was little—maybe seven or eight, I'm not sure—my mother took me out riding. It was in late autumn, I think; one of those wet, grey days with a sky like an overturned iron bowl. There were three of us, me and mother on her fine mare and a tall servant named Sion on a swaybacked nag. The Saxons were everywhere in those days, but Mother didn't seem worried. I guess she was confident that her magic would protect us.

"The land flattened out, and we rode for hours seeing nothing but low hills and sheep. Finally, a large mound loomed on the horizon. It was nightfall when we reached it. At the top, Mother had Sion make a fire with the bundle of kindling they'd brought with them. After it had

burned for a while, she cut off a lock of my hair with her dagger and then took out a small purse containing every tooth I'd ever lost. She buried the teeth in a circle around the fire, tapping them like seeds into the muddy earth. Kneeling down, she threw the lock of my hair onto the flames and began talking in a voice so low I couldn't make out what she was saying. She did that for a long time, while Sion and I just stood there watching. Once, he caught my eye and crossed himself. Finally, she stood up and said it was time to go home.

"Later in her chambers, she drew me close to her. 'No men,' she said to me. 'Don't ever lie with a man. Do you understand me? You're to stay a virgin, Guinevere, a virgin always. Don't let a man put his cock in you.'

"I hardly knew what she meant, but I asked her why. 'Because,' she said, 'you're promised to a fairy king, and he won't want you if your maidenhead is broken. I've bound you to him with your teeth and your hair.' She got a faraway look in her eyes and stopped holding me so tight. 'I don't want to get old,' she said. 'King Melwas is a lord of age and loss; he can make me stay young, if he wishes. If he likes you, you won't get old, either. Your teeth won't fall out, and your hair will keep its color. And the same for me. Except you'll be with him and I'll be here. Don't fret; you'll feast on sweet apples in the Otherworld, and drink nectar from a silver cup.' I didn't understand what she was talking about, of course, but I didn't ask her to explain. Just thinking about it frightened me."

Guinevere stretched out on her stomach, her chin in her hands. Those hands were rather big for a woman her size, as were her feet, which were bare, for she'd slipped out of her sandals. Like the crooked grin, these deviations from the classical ideal did little damage to her beauty.

"That was that, until I was twelve or so. One day big, shifty-eyed Sion got me alone in the stable. He said that I should lie with him, that he could save me. He said he knew the bargain that my mother had made, and that it would doom me, but if I lay with him I'd be free. Melwas would have no claim on me once my maidenhead was gone."

I thought of her then, seeing her all small and fragile in my head, and I wanted to kill this Sion, wherever he was now. "What happened?"

Guinevere picked up a small orange beetle with black spots and let it crawl upon her forefinger. She did not speak again until it spread its wings and flew away.

"He tried to force me, but I got away. Mother had him hanged, of course, with his eyes put out first and his nose, fingers and toes all cut off. Soon after that, she sent me across the channel to the convent. I never saw her again. She was killed the next winter when a horse fell on top of her. Stupid woman. She hadn't asked to stay young, just not to get old. I suppose you could say her wish was granted."

She rested her chin on her hands and looked at me with little-girl solemnity. "I'm still a virgin, Mordred, which is surprising. Lots of girls lost their maidenheads at the convent. Novice nuns can be just as wicked as

monks, you know. I even joined in some of their love games, but I never let anyone put a candle or carrot in-side me. Do I shock you?"

I smiled. "Not likely. So, you kept your mother's wishes in mind?"

She shook her head. "No, I forgot them for a time. The sisters had as many books as some monasteries, and a few of those books were secular, even worldly. They allowed me to read whatever I wanted. There in Brittany, reading the old dead Greeks and Romans with their clear logic and polished grammar, I felt very far away from the superstitions of the Summer Country.

"And then my father brought me back to meet Arthur. Here was a Christian king whose reign had been prophesied by a magician, a magician who claimed to be the son of a Prince of the Otherworld. I never met Merlin, but Arthur has told me about him, and I know my husband-to-be is not a liar. For all that Merlin aided Arthur, Arthur was terrified of him. Anything that scares Arthur must be very real and very dangerous. Merlin was real enough. Maybe Melwas is, too."

I lay on my back and looked at the sky, a high blue dome mottled with scudding clouds and wheeling birds, its sweeping arch for once free of any sign of rain. What to tell her that would make her feel better? I couldn't lie, not to her; she was too smart for that.

"It's true; the Otherworld is real enough," I said at last. "It's not just a place to be found over the sea or at the bottom of a lake or inside a hollow hill. It's all around us, inside us even. Believe in it, but don't believe everything you hear about it. Not every superstition is true. People get things wrong, Gwen, all the time, about magic as much as anything else. My mother taught me a lot about the Otherworld and those that dwell there. She never said anything about a prince of that realm named Melwas."

She didn't seem reassured. "Perhaps he's something very old, a god even, one that most people don't remember anymore."

"And perhaps he doesn't exist at all. Soon you'll be married and everything will be all right. If you want to be rid of your maidenhead before then, there's plenty of strapping louts about who can arrange that for you. If Arthur ever asks, tell him that Sion succeeded in his attempt that time in the stables."

She laughed and threw a piece of cheese at me; she'd never been an easy one to shock. "Right. I could be like one of those old Roman ladies, and have a stream of lovers trooping through my husband's bed. I don't think so, Mordred. I just wish he hadn't postponed the wedding again. You'd think he was scared of me."

Not of you yourself, I thought, but of what you represent. That time my mother lay with him in disguise had given him a scar inside, turning him towards God and away from the flesh. He was frightened, if not of marriage, then of what went on in the marriage bed. But I couldn't tell her that.

I sat up. "Don't worry. You're safe in Camelot. You'll marry the greatest king this island has ever known, and you're safe in his fortress. Nothing can touch you here."

She sighed. "Except dreams. That's why I brought this up. Last night, I had the same nightmare the third time in a week. I was running barefoot through a sort of maze. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, everything was made of sharp little stones the color of bone. They cut my feet. Behind me, someone was calling my name in a voice like the sound the wind makes in the eaves at night. I knew it was Melwas, and I was in his power."

I took her hand again. "Dreams are usually just dreams, Gwen. Oh, they can be portents, sometimes, but people put too much stock in that. Usually they tell us more about what we're thinking right now, about the things we want and are scared of, than what's going to happen in the future."

She looked at me without speaking for a long moment, until I felt I might drown in those deep eyes. "Thank you, Mordred," she said at last. "I think I just needed to hear some common sense. You're very good at that, you know."

What she did next surprised me, and even in those days I was not easy to surprise. Bending close, she kissed me. If my head hadn't been slightly tilted, she would have caught me on the mouth instead of the cheek, and even so, our lips brushed for a moment. When I was able to think again, I was glad no one but Regan had seen us, as my relationship with Arthur was strained enough as it was.

She put the chessmen back in their little bag and the wine flask back in the basket, which she handed to Regan, and the two of them began the climb up and out of the amphitheater. I remained behind, sitting on the grass, my feet in a warm patch of sunlight and my back against the cool stone. Eventually my erection went away, but when I shut my eyes I could still feel the warm touch of her hand upon my own.

Arthur returned to the palace that afternoon, at the head of a troop of dirty and exhausted soldiers. He'd been drilling them hard, staging mock campaigns with wooden swords and padded armor, pitting squadron against squadron in the mud flats that surrounded the lower reaches of the Usk at low tide. Peacetime would not soften their edge, he liked to say. If the North and South Saxons ever tried to unite, and break the wedge that had been driven between them at Badon, they'd find themselves facing a British army as disciplined and ready as any Roman legion. Arthur had been a crack commander long before Uther's deathbed proclamation and Merlin's prophecy made him a king, and he remained one still.

That night, when Guinevere and almost everyone else had gone to bed, I found him staring moodily into the dying fire. Disdaining the room's Roman-style couches, he sat cross-legged on a wolf skin in front of the raised hearth, still wearing his ragged harness, a mug of hot ale in his hand and a distant expression on his weathered, clean-shaven face. Sixteen when he sired me, he was thirty-six now, and there were grey streaks in his close-cropped peppery hair, care lines on his brow and about his wintry eyes.

I remembered that face with fewer lines, and the hair with no grey, as he squinted into the unceasing wind

and tried not to look at me, the day he'd found out who we really were to each other. "*Get up behind me,*" he'd said harshly to the boy he'd loved when he thought that boy his nephew. "*I'll not leave you here, no matter what you are.*" A sharp wound that, but one that had healed, as much as such a wound can. That cold beach in Orkney was years and miles behind us now, and I didn't hate him anymore.

"I believe the Lady Guinevere is troubled by the way the royal wedding keeps getting postponed," I said at last. Arthur and I weren't what one would call close, but no matter how distant, we could always speak bluntly to each other.

"I owe her an apology," he said softly. "And much else besides, considering what sort of husband she's getting. Still, it couldn't be helped. March would never have paid his taxes if I hadn't ridden to collect them with a hundred horsemen at my back. Then there was Cormac and his reivers. I can't neglect my duties, no matter how long the land has been at this uneasy peace."

"Yes, but you've more than one sort of duty. You can't just bring her here, then put off marrying her until you're both old and grey. Get it done with, for your sake and hers."

He continued to look at the fire. "What's it to you?"

A good question, that. "I like her, and think she can make you happy. You accepted me here at Camelot when you didn't have to, after Lot and my mother were dead and there was nothing for me in Orkney. I owe you for that, for I know that you'd have been more comfortable if I had gone elsewhere."

He grunted. "If I'd turned you away, I'd have lost Gawain, the best captain I have. My happiness can't be the only reason you want to see me wedded."

I sat beside him on the hearth. "It's a matter of more than happiness. She may be in danger."

He finally looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"Her mother was a sorceress, and not as wise a one as mine. She made a bargain with the Otherworld, pledging her daughter's virginity to a power there. When you wed Guinevere, the terms of that bargain will be broken, and no one will have a claim on her but you. Until that happens, though, I fear for her. Do it before the summer's over. Hell, do it now."

He drained his cup and put it aside. "I'm not grateful for this knowledge, Mordred. I've been too touched by the dark world as it is. This wedding is a way out of that, something clean, with nothing of the stain that has lain upon my life. Now you tell me that it's not clean at all."

Shit, here came his damned guilt again—was there no aspect of his wretched life into which it didn't creep? Don't be a prat, I wanted to tell him. The past is bloody well past; let it rot and be forgotten. But of course I didn't.

"Clean or unclear, that has nothing to do with this. It's probably just superstition, anyway. Her mother may have been at least as mad as she was magical. But have the wedding soon and you'll allay her fears."

He stood up. "If she has fears, she can confide them to me. I'll not jump at shadows, or be moved by hearsay.

Thanks for your concern, but we don't need to speak of this again."

With that he left me, to the dying firelight and myself. Well, I had tried my best, and if my best wasn't good enough, there was no sense worrying. Besides, was I really so eager to see her wed to him? There was nothing for it but to go to bed.

I'd taken Merlin's old room atop the tower that grew out of the southeast wall of the palace because everyone else was afraid of it, and because it afforded me some privacy. I held no particularly exalted station at court, and if there hadn't been an unused chamber, I'd be sleeping on sheepskins in the great hall, or on straw in the regular soldiers' barracks. Tonight, I was especially glad of my good fortune. When we were young, Gawain teased me often enough for talking in my sleep, and there was no reason to believe I'd lost the habit. If my recent dreams were any indication, I was all too likely to break the stillness of the night by whispering Guinevere's name.

Two weeks later I was in town on a cool, clear afternoon, pushing my way through the jostling crowds and trying to keep my prized doeskin boots out of the wide refuse-strewn gutter that ran down the center of the gravel street. I'd dressed in a new cloak with an intricate blue and green plaid and my best red woolen tunic, in the hopes that outward finery would improve my mood. If that didn't, there was always food. Word had reached the palace that oyster boats from Cornwall were docked in the harbor, which meant the oysters were already being smoked and sold in the forum, along with trade goods from across the channel. I was heading that way when I rounded a corner and saw Guinevere coming out of the church that had once been a temple of Diana. She wore a red linen mantle over a gown of green and gold silk, and there were silver pins in her braided hair.

"Hello," I said, squeezing my way through a small flock of confused-looking sheep. "Don't tell me you've come here alone, dressed in such finery. Where's your shadow?"

She laughed. "Regan has a cold. It was too nice a day to stay cooped up in the palace, so I bullied Kay into letting me come to town. Unfortunately, he insisted on giving me a bodyguard, a big ruffian named Dunvallo, who doesn't seem to much appreciate the duty. I managed to leave him in the stable, where he was playing dice with the grooms. If you care to join me for the day, you'll spare me having to ride back with him. Since the bathhouse works now, you'd think more of Arthur's warriors would use it."

I knew Dunvallo and did not care for him, nor for the thought of her in his company, though he was trustworthy enough, for all that he was a foul-smelling lout. "I'll be glad to join you. There are oysters in the market."

"Aye, and merchants from Gaul. I've a mind to buy a new brooch, and maybe fine cloth for my wedding gown."

I laughed. "What, it's not made yet?"

For a moment, her expression was grim. "Oh, it's made, but I've had too long to get used to it; perhaps a new one will cheer me up."

I looked up at the stone and plaster facade of the church, where the image of the Goddess had rather crudely been transformed into that of the virgin. "Why pray here when you have the chapel in the palace?"

A donkey nearly bumped into her, but the beast's owner rapped the animal with his staff and tugged his forelock in deference. She patted the donkey's flank as it ambled past.

"I pray wherever I can, Mordred. Bishop Gerontius is a good man, and gives me some comfort. The bloody nightmares have been troubling me again."

We moved towards the forum, me staying slightly ahead of her to keep her from being jostled into the gutter. I was troubled by this news. Even if her dreams weren't portents, they indicated a state of mind that did not bode well for the marriage.

"Can I ask you a blunt question?" I said, frowning at a whore whom I did not want to recognize me just then.

"Of course."

The woman grinned at me, but said nothing as we passed her. "Do you love Arthur?"

"Love him? I hardly know the man. It's been the better part of a year since he brought me to Camelot, and in that time he's not spent two continuous weeks here."

That was true enough. Arthur had never been one to lounge at court, but gossip had it that he'd become even more restless since Gwen had arrived, and the wedding had been postponed four times in nine months. My abortive attempt at discussing the matter with him had done no good at all.

"What was it like? When you met him, I mean?"

"Oh, God, was I surprised. I'd known something was up when my father brought me out of that wretched convent, for he'd never shown any interest in me before. I suppose if I'd thought about it, I'd have realized some sort of prearranged marriage was in the air, for what else does one do with eligible daughters? But I hadn't thought about it. So there I was in the orchard, sitting under a tree and reading Ovid, when my father came walking down the lane with a man I might have taken for a common soldier."

She smiled warmly, and I felt a pang of jealousy. "Arthur was his usual roughneck self, dressed in worn leather and smelling like a horse, and I could hardly credit it when father introduced him as the Pendragon. Still, when I rose from bowing, I saw depths in those grey eyes, like looking at the sea from high up, or the sky on a bright clear morning."

Oh yes, I knew that gaze; winter, but with just a hint of May. I tried to sound nonchalant. "So, what did you talk about, that first time?"

She sighed. "Not much. He was shy around women, and blushed when I took a bite out of an apple and handed it to him. Then he asked me to read aloud from my book, but when I did he blushed even redder and bade me stop. He must have liked me, though, for the next thing I knew, the arrangements had been made and it was off to Camelot."

I steered her away from a beggar, an ex-soldier who'd lost his arm in some campaign and his nose to the clap.

"Were you happy?"

"I was . . . surprised. And nervous, of course. And relieved, for now I knew what the future held for me." She laughed, a full throaty sound, not at all a giggle. "And it's not a bad future, is it, becoming Queen of All the Britons? There were times when I'd thought I'd been forgotten after Mother's death, and would grow old among nuns."

I smiled at the thought of her in the convent, a lark cooped up with puffs. We were in the forum now, a big open square, paved in flagstones rather than gravel, walled by open-fronted shops of wood and whitewashed plaster. These were manned by the merchants who actually lived here, and made their homes on the second floor above their goods. Other sellers worked from wooden stalls in the center of the square, or simply stood beside open barrels, or laid their goods out on cowhides or plank-and-trestle tables.

Gwen ended up buying two brooches, both of silver, and a string of white pearls. Then, after haggling with a cloth dealer like any village wife, she purchased a bolt of green and gold brocade. I bought two dozen smoked oysters from a balding, one-eyed Cornishman, then a wicker basket to put them in from a dark little gap-toothed girl with hair even blacker than mine. Gwen helped me devour the oysters before we were out of the forum. She ate more daintily than I did, and scolded me for getting their dark juice on my chin, which she then wiped with one corner of her fine new cloth.

We found her temporary bodyguard in the stable. A distant and not particularly favored cousin of the King of Gwynned, Dunvallo was a big red-faced lout with thinning black hair and the intricate tattoos of the Dubuni all over his wide hands and beefy arms. He was lying on his back on the straw, his head on the lap of Megra, the whore I'd seen earlier. Fortunately, she gave no sign that she knew me, but continued to twirl the pointed ends of Dunvallo's mustache, which he regularly stiffened with pig grease.

Dunvallo greeted us with an explosive belch. Rising, he smiled and gave Gwen a bow I thought far too casual. "Here now, Lady Guinevere, I see you've found yourself a new escort. Will you not be needing me, then?"

"No thank you, Lord Dunvallo. Mordred will see me safely back to the palace."

Dunvallo grinned at me, exposing more stumps than whole teeth. "I'm sure he will, for the boy's a good lad, despite everything." The condescending tone was nothing new; he and I had never gotten along.

"You can go now," I said coldly.

"Don't mind if I do," he snickered. "Megra here has been keeping me company, and since I've had a fumble, I'm craving a tumble. She's a fine one in the sack, and she doesn't charge much. Say goodbye to little Mordred, Megra. I believe you two know each other." Megra remained silent, but gave me a smirking curtsy.

Anger flared on Gwen's cheeks. "Lord Dunvallo, you bring dishonor to yourself and to your High King, consorting with a whore in front of his Queen-to-be. I shall speak of this with Arthur, when he returns from Chichester."

That brought a change in Dunvallo's manner. He

blanched and fell to one knee, all his arrogance gone at the mention of Arthur's name. "Lady, don't; I didn't mean any disrespect. There's no need to trouble the Pendragon about this. I'll say penance in the chapel tonight, and mind my manners in the future. Please forgive me."

There was sweat on his brow. Was it Arthur's rage he feared? No, I knew better than that; it was his disapproval. That was my father's genius, to inspire something like worship even in a sodden, ill-tempered lout like this one.

Guinevere turned to me. "Do you forgive him, Mordred? I believe you were the one he was trying to insult."

I was starting to enjoy this. "Well, Dunvallo," I said smugly, "is it my forgiveness you crave as well?"

He tilted his head lower, probably to keep Gwen from seeing the expression on his face. "Lord Mordred," he said through what certainly sounded like clenched teeth, "I beg your pardon also."

"You have it, then," I said airily. "Now off with you."

He left, not looking back. After a moment Megra, who had watched all this while we ignored her, followed him. She paused at the entrance of the stable long enough to flash a quick grin. "Good day to you, Your Ladyship," she said to Guinevere. "And one to you also, Mordred." I'd have thrown something at her if she hadn't moved quickly on.

"Whores is it, then?" said Guinevere as I saddled her dappled mare. "The ladies of the palace aren't good enough for you?"

My face felt very warm. Damn her, how could she have this effect on me? I usually didn't give a fart what anybody thought. "A man has needs, my lady."

She snorted. "Don't 'my lady' me, Mordred. We women have needs, too, but we don't go sneaking off to some lusty farm boy or smith's apprentice each time we feel them, do we?"

Enough of this nonsense. I turned from the horse and walked towards her. "Look at me, Gwen; I'm no saint, nor even a proper Christian. My mother once lay with her own brother, and her husband later murdered her in front of me. I may be young, but I've killed men, and not all of them honorably. I get drunk from time to time. I blaspheme a god I don't even believe in. I cheat at games, except for chess. I have a foul temper. And I lie with whores. Accept me as I am, like me or don't like me, be my friend or not, but don't expect me to change."

Damn those unreadable eyes of hers. "Not even for me?"

I turned away from her. "Not even for you, lady. If it was me you were going to marry, maybe I could manage it. But for my father's bride, no, I'm not that perfect, nor do I want to be. I'm satisfied with myself, and that's enough. It's better than some people can claim." It was Arthur I was thinking of.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to judge you like that." She tugged at my sleeve until I faced her again, and brushed a strand of hair out of my eyes.

"We better go," I said, looking down at the straw, at her feet, at the delicate tracery of veins in one exposed ankle, at anything but her face.

She didn't say anything else. Neither did I, not in the stable or out of it, or on the road back to the palace. In

the courtyard, though, she thanked me, and bade me a good day. There was a sadness in her eyes I'd never noticed there before. Lord knows what was in mine.

The wedding was postponed yet again. There was talk of an alliance forming between Aelle of the South Saxons and Oesc of Kent, with Cunedag of the Picts possibly joining them as well. Nothing came of it, at least not then, but it was a tense summer. Arthur spent much time in the East Midlands, drilling his men with the local war-bands and making sure no ambitious petty king would sell him out the way Cerdic had done three years before. "He is older than me, you know; if we go on like this, I'll be a widow before we're even married."

Despite the mordant joking, I could tell she was becoming somewhat depressed and withdrawn, and we spent less time in each other's company. When I did see her, she had circles under her eyes, and looked like she wasn't sleeping much. I asked her if she was still having bad dreams. She said no, but I knew she was lying.

Unlike my brother, I had no official duties here, not yet, although Arthur had promised to give me a posting soon. Bored and restless, I even thought about visiting Gawain up north, but couldn't quite pull myself away from court, from her, though I knew I'd feel even less comfortable here once she was married. Instead, I started avoiding the fortress, spending my available time riding the broken hills of West Cambria, where the land was higher and rockier than my native Orkney, but just as barren. When I was in the palace, I tended to keep to my chamber. Sometimes, I talked to Mother.

Merlin's old sanctum was as spartan as any monk's cell, just a circular wall of undressed stone with a floor and ceiling of rough timbers. There was a trap door in the ceiling, which opened on the roof and leaked during rainstorms. The floor was still covered with scuffed chalk marks and dried bloodstains and the crushed stubs of tallow candles. The only other relic of the chamber's former occupant was the big oak trunk that I used as a table, which was full of rat-gnawed books and scrolls. I'd skimmed some of them, but the depredations of the rats, as well as water damage from the leaky ceiling, had left most unreadable. There had been another trunk, even bigger and rimmed with iron bands and locked with a heavy padlock. Soft, muddy voices had whispered from it when I was trying to sleep at night, so I'd given it to two servants with instructions that it should be buried somewhere far from the palace.

The timbers in the low ceiling were irregularly set with small bronze hooks. I took Mother's head from its chest and hung it from the stoutest hook by a loop I tied in her dull black hair. Then I sat on the stool that was the room's only furnishing, other than a tin basin and the wooden box filled with straw and covered with sheepskins that was my bed. My lamp burned low on top of the big oak chest, sending shadows dancing across the shriveled brown face that hung in front of me, smelling of cedar oil and preservative spices.

"Why did you want me to bring you with me?" I asked it.

The sunken eyes did not open, but the grey lips moved. The voice that issued from between them was faint and full of echoes, as though it was coming from the bottom of a deep well.

"Why do you think I wanted you to do anything?"

So, it would be that sort of conversation. The night before we sailed for Camelot, when Gawain and I slept in a hut beside the collapsed ruin of Lot's palace in Orkney, she'd come to me in a dream, naked and bloody as on the night she'd died. I reminded her of that. "You told me not to leave you there, that I should keep your head with me until the day of Arthur's wedding."

The head actually chuckled, a dry, raspy, disconcerting sound. "Perhaps you had that dream because you could not bear to part with me. Do you love me, Mordred? If so, give me a kiss."

Even dead, she would jab at me like this. "I loved you when you were alive. Now you're just a skull and leathery skin, through which your spirit can speak. Such a thing has no business speaking to me of love. Or should I just bury you, and love your memory?"

She hissed like the wind in dry, dead grass. "Don't do that yet. You need me."

Why had I even begun this conversation? I should have left her locked up in her chest. "I don't need anybody, Mother."

The drawn lips pulled back from yellow teeth, forming what might have been a smile. "Oh? Have you attained your heart's desire?"

This was pointless. I rose to remove the head from the hook, then sat down again. There was one thing I'd been meaning to ask her. "Who is Melwas?"

She was silent for so long I thought she wasn't going to answer. "A lord who is less than he once was," she said at last.

"Less than he once was?"

Her eyes opened then, unnaturally soft and dark and alive in that dead face. "His realm is much diminished. Ages ago, he warred with the other Fair Folk and lost, to suffer blight and banishment. Now he rules alone in a wasted, barren corner of the Otherworld. Only the offerings given him by the folk of the Summer Country sustain him at all."

I related what Guinevere had told me. "What would this creature want with her?"

Her rictus spread wider. "What does a magpie want with a shiny bauble? He takes pretty things, when they are offered him, though he can get no pleasure from them, and forgets them almost as soon as they are his."

I did not like what I was hearing. "Is she in danger, then?"

She chuckled again. "Why would you care?"

I hated her for enjoying this. "Just answer the question."

"Not if Arthur marries her before Samhain, when the Old Powers are strongest. And not if he lies with her before that. But he is probably unwilling to do such a thing before marriage, and maybe not even after it. That's a pity, for he was a good lay once."

I suddenly wanted to tear her from her hook and dash her against the wall, until her withered brains spilled out

upon the floor. Instead, I put her back in her chest and covered her up again.

The autumn came without incident, and it seemed unlikely that the Saxons and Picts would start any trouble before the next summer. Arthur announced that he would definitely marry Guinevere in November, right after Samhain. I tried to tell him something of what Mother had told me, without revealing the source of my information, but it was to no avail. In fact, I wondered if my previous warnings were why he'd kept postponing the wedding throughout the summer, for he could be bloody contrary at times. I also wondered if, perversely, that had been what I'd really wanted, him putting off the marriage so I had more time alone with Guinevere. And I thought these twisty, knife-in-the-gut feelings had died with my mother.

My posting was not to come until after Christmas. It had become too wet and dreary in the hills, so when I wanted to get away from the palace, my only alternative was the town. I tried to forget Guinevere in taverns and in the beds of whores. One such whore in particular was the aforementioned Megra, after I'd gotten over my irritation at how she and Dunvallo had embarrassed me in front of Guinevere. Megra had a room above a smithy near the forum, which one reached via a ladder set against the alley wall after the smithy was locked at night.

The festivities began well before the wedding itself, with the fortress and the whole town turning out for days of games and nights of drunken revelry, to such an extent that one would have thought it was May, with Beltain rather than Samhain coming up. Three days before the ceremony, it all became too much, and I got very drunk, then sought solace in Megra's bed. Our fumbling did not go well.

"Never mind, love," she said, sitting up and searching for a flea in her pubic hair. "It happens all the time. Rest a bit, think of something nice, and in no time at all the old Maypole will be tall and straight again, won't it, and we'll have our fun, down the rabbit hole with your old badger, yes we will."

"You're mixing metaphors," I said as I turned over on my back.

"What's that?" she asked, rolling the flea between her thumb and forefinger.

"Metaphors. Maypoles and badgers. Never mind."

Megra hadn't stopped talking. "Oh, you're wrong, love," she continued cheerfully. "It's you who should be paying me no mind, babbling on like I do. I can't help it, though, I'm just a talkative sort; words, words, words and seldom a lick of sense, Fergus used to say. Fergus, now, he was a sweet one. Couldn't stand my chatter, though, not at all. He got to stopping his ears with tallow before coming to my chamber. Tallow, can you believe that? One time, it was a hot summer's night and all, and we'd rolling about for almost an hour, Fergus being able to keep it up like a goat—no offense, love—and wouldn't you know it, the plugs in his ears began to melt, and there he was with yellow goo dripping down the sides of his head, and didn't I just scream and scream."



Thought he'd caught some horrible disease, I did; I mean, he was Irish."

I padded to the opening in the wall that served as both door and window to Megra's loft. Torches were lit in the street, and there was a bonfire in the square, with warriors and townspeople cavorting about, breaking off in pairs to go screw in the shadows or singly to pass out or puke in some dark corner. At least everyone else was having fun.

"You're thinking of someone else, aren't you?" asked Megra, the lamplight sending shadows dancing across the pink and fleshy landscape of her body.

"No."

"Yes, yes you are. Believe me, I know men. All of you are always thinking of someone else all the time, and you're always bringing them to bed with you. Fergus was like that. In his head, he was with a dozen different women or twenty dozen, I don't know. Not that we women don't do the same. Tell you what, let's play Let's Pretend. Shut your eyes, and tell me who you want me to be, and I'll be her, all night long, as many times as you want. 'Course, you have to be who I want *you* to be, too, it's only fair."

I actually smiled. "No. I don't think so."

"Come on, love, of no. It could be anyone you want. Helen of Troy, Theodora-whatever-her-name-is, Iseult of Cornwall. You can even call me Guinevere, if you like."

I turned at that. "What?"

"You can call me Guinevere, and I'll call you Arthur. We can be the King and Queen, here in our heads and bed, and who's to know, and we'll do it better now than they'll be doing it tomorrow, won't we just? Are you for it, then? Grab my tits and call me Gwennie."

Before I knew it, I was on top of her, not in any loving or lustful way, but with one hand twisting her hair and the other clutching her under the chin.

"Don't say that. And don't bring her into this. I mean it."

Her eyes were popping and she was gasping like a landed carp, and then I had control of myself again and let her go, for relations with Arthur would be even worse if I committed murder on the night before his wedding. No dead whores for the dowry. Still, it might do me good to kill someone.

I donned my wool breeches and tunic, pulled on my boots and picked up my belted sword. Megra huddled on her sheepskin, her broad, flat face all frightened eyes staring out from under her disheveled hair. "I'm sorry," I said as I stood up.

"Fine," she mumbled. "I just didn't know you were like the rest, that's all."

"Like the rest of what?"

"Men. Always ready to hurt."

"Yes, Megra," I said gently. "We're all alike. Bastards, bloody bastards all. I wish we weren't." I kissed her on the cheek and left.

When I clambered down the ladder, I found half a dozen or so palace warriors waiting in the alley, hunkered down and throwing dice by the light of a small pile of burning manure. Available girls were in short supply this night, so they were waiting their turns with Megra.

One of them, bigger than the others, starting laughing when he saw me. I recognized the braying voice as Dunvallo's.

"Done already, Mordred?" he asked with a boozy leer. "The salt air of Orkney must breed limp manhood."

I stopped and looked at him, and actually found myself smiling. This was the sort of trouble Gawain usually kept me out of, but he had been delayed up north. Bad luck for me, maybe, but worse for this idiot.

The firelight made Dunvallo even more red-faced than usual, and as he lurched closer I smelled the ale on his breath and saw fresh, unidentified crusty stains all tangled in his filthy beard. He was not a fastidious sort, even sober. More to the point, he was one of those men who seem bigger when they're drunk. If I did fight him, I'd be a fool to fight fair.

"Arthur won't have any such trouble tomorrow," he continued, turning back to his cronies. "Not with a handful like Guinevere. The Pendragon, bless him, has been too solemn of late. It'll do him good to lie with that tasty piece of work. Maybe it'll make him forget his past troubles, like the time a certain witch tricked him into siring this whelp here. Or is that just a story the bitch made up?"

He turned back to me. "It's a lie, isn't it, Orkney boy, the claim that the Dragon is your father. I mean, how could he be? You're short and dark as a Pict. That's what really happened, isn't it? You mother screwed a Pict, then told everybody she'd lain with her own brother."

Dunvallo was obviously extremely drunk, and his comrades seemed a bit taken aback by this, shocked even. Oh, they didn't like me much, but even if they didn't believe me Arthur's son, they knew he was my uncle, and that made me blood kin to a man they worshipped, a relationship not to be spoken of in such coarse terms. For myself, I'd made my mind up to kill Dunvallo when he made his crude reference to Gwen, and his cheap insults only gave me a pretext. Still smiling, I looked him straight in the eye, my thumb resting on the hilt of my sword. "I'll have an apology for that. Or your blood."

"Oh, what's this?" he said, sneering. "I think I should be the one to take offense, Mordred. What was it you called me the other night?"

"A cretinous rat-faced git who smells like a pig's arse and looks like somebody who would fuck one," I said loudly and clearly. Actually, I'd only called him half of that, the part before the first "who," but since he was already drunk, I might as well make him really mad, too. That way he might not fight so well. Oh, yes—a wise strategy indeed, like asking someone to piss on your head when your breeches are on fire.

His sword was out and glittering in the torchlight. "I'm going to cut you, Orkney boy; I'm going to open you up and feed your guts to my dogs. How's that?"

Instead of drawing my own sword, I turned and walked out into the middle of the street, then wheeled to face him. "Maybe you will, Dunvallo. It's in God's hands now. Will you let me kneel and pray before we fight?"

He laughed as he came after me. "You, pray?"

"Arthur will take it better if he hears you let him pray first," said one of his companions.

The logic was specious, but Dunvallo paused a moment. Arthur's displeasure was something he'd apparently not considered. "All right, then; kneel away. But be quick, or I'll chop you before you're up again."

I knelt. My right hand was beside my calf, out of his line of sight. I felt for a handful of gravel and found a fresh horse turd instead. Well, that would do. When I was a boy in Orkney, I could bring birds down from cliffs with just a stone and my throwing arm.

I stood up and threw the turd in one motion. My sword was out a half-second after it smacked him in the face, and he was bellowing and scraping it from his eyes when I lunged and cut low at his legs. My blade caught him on the right thigh just below the hem of his tunic, and I felt it bite down into bone. I pulled it out and skipped back.

"You bastard!" he yelled in a high-pitched voice. "I'm going to kill you!"

"You'll have to catch me first," I said, still dancing backwards. With such a wound he'd be much slower, and all I had to do was stay out of his way until blood loss took its toll.

He came lurching forward, his face very pale now; the blood soaking through his cross-gartered breeches was black in the firelight. If he'd had any brains, he would have called upon his comrades to protect him while he staunches his wound, but instead he just stumbled after me, groaning and cursing. He didn't take more than ten paces before falling to his knees.

I walked up to him. He tried to use his sword to help himself stand. I knocked it away with mine. "Mercy," he gasped. "I yield."

"Too late for that, Dunvallo," I said. I cut at his neck, but he put up his arm. Only in stories do you cut someone's arm clean off with one blow. My sword got stuck in the bone just above his elbow. His eyes rolled up as I put my foot on his chest and pulled it out. He flopped backwards and lay there bleeding. After a while, he didn't breathe anymore. None of his friends had made a move to help him.

"You didn't fight fair," said one of them, sounding for all the world like a petulant child. Despite this, he was a hard-looking oaf, far bigger as big as Dunvallo and rather lighter on his feet. Drawing his sword, he advanced on me, with several of his comrades following suit.

"Come on, shitheads," I said with a careless laugh. I heard hoofbeats in the street behind me, the sound of several riders, but did not turn around. "You want some of what your friend got? Come on, then." Flight would have been prudent; although quite drunk, they were all hardened veterans, with years of experience in cutting up armed men, whereas all I had to my name was a couple of minor skirmishes. I didn't care; the thought of getting wounded or even killed the night before Arthur and Guinevere's wedding was perversely attractive.

"Enough of this nonsense," boomed a voice behind me. "Put away those goddamn swords, all of you, or I'll stick them up your bums." I didn't sheathe my sword, but I did lower it as I turned around, for even in those circumstances I was not stupid enough to raise a weapon without knowing whom I faced.

There were five riders, four holding torches that glittered off their polished mail. The fifth, a great bear of a man with a long black beard, struck the butt of his long spear against the ground and glared at me.

"Hello, Lord Kay," I said to the man who was both the palace captain and Arthur's foster brother. "What brings you to town on this fine night?"

"We've been searching for you," he growled, looking at the corpse beside me. "Is that Dunvallo?"

I put my sword away. "It was a fair fight." One should always temper lies with a little truth, so I pointed at Dunvallo's friends. "Even they'll admit he started it."

He didn't give them time to respond. "Nobody cares about that right now. Arthur wants you."

I was in no mood to be summoned like a lackey. "Why?"

Kay hooked a thumb at one of his men, who quickly dismounted. "It's the Lady Guinevere," he said with unaccustomed softness. "She's been abducted."

"What?" Lugh and Jesus, while I'd been whoring and brawling. "Abducted? How? And by whom?"

He motioned for Dunvallo's friends to leave, which they did, lugging the deceased with them. "No one knows. She disappeared from her chamber, with no witness but her maid, who's having hysterics. When Arthur sorted out what had happened, he sent us to find you. Lucky for you we came when we did, or you'd have been chopped up like dog meat."

Oh, yes, I'd just been drowned in good fortune lately. "Why does Arthur want me?"

He shook his head. "No time for talk. Take Riderch's horse and come with us."

I started to protest that I wanted to get my own horse from the stable three blocks away, but thought better of it. If Arthur felt my help was needed, then maybe it was, and time was indeed crucial. Riderch boosted me to his saddle and we were off without further ceremony.

Jesus, Lugh and a dozen bugged saints. Was this what Gwen had feared, the work of the mysterious Melwas, or was it something more mundane, a move by Picts or Saxons looking for concessions? Nobody had any time for answers. We rode in silence, through dark streets, some still crowded with revelers, and out the town gates and down the road that ran beside the sighing river. When we reached the fortress, there was a double guard at the gatehouse and the outer courts were a blaze of torchlit activity, men running and yelling, riders and whole squadrons galloping in or pounding away into the night, sentries shouting back and forth on the high walls. Kay hustled me through the confusion and into the great hall.

Arthur was pacing in front of the fire. I'd apparently missed the worst of his rage. Couches, stools and benches were scattered about, some in several pieces, and the imperial sword of office, the sword of Maximus that Arthur once pulled from its block at Tintagel, was wedged in an overturned table, like a butcher's cleaver in a chopping block. An old woman in a familiar-looking black gown huddled beside the raised hearth, sobbing hysterically. There was a bloody gash on her forehead.

"Here he is," said Kay, "though I still don't know why

you wanted him. When we found him, he'd just killed Dunvallo in some sort of drunken squabble."

"That can be sorted out later," said Arthur. "If she is where I think she is, he may be the only one who can help."

My fears were confirmed. He wouldn't be asking for my aid if her abduction was the work of human enemies. "What's happened?"

Arthur turned towards me. His face was drawn and pale, and there was a crazed gleam in his eyes, but his voice was calm. "Guinevere's gone, by Jesus and Our Lady, and I fear that it's no mortal man who's taken her." He nodded at the old woman in black. "Tell Mordred what happened."

"It was a devil," shrieked the crone. "A devil has taken my lady. I was brushing her hair before she went to bed, just like every night, when there he was, out of nowhere!"

I stared at the old woman. Why did she look so damned familiar? "There *who* was?"

"The devil, I said! He was horribly tall, and thin, and grey and wrinkled like leather, and naked under his cloak, which was made of teeth. Teeth! There were teeth in his staff, too, and when he struck me with it, I fell down in a swoon." That explained the gash in her forehead. "When they found me, I was like this. God and Jesus, help me! Help her, but help me!"

"Be quiet, Regan," snapped Arthur. "You do yourself no credit, and her no good."

I walked towards the old woman with horrified fascination. It was Regan all right, but much changed, her face drawn and grey and mapped with wrinkles. Her hair was white as snow, and when she opened her mouth, there didn't seem to be any teeth in her shriveled gums.

I wheeled on Arthur. "It was Melwas. I warned you about this. A lord of the Otherworld has her now."

Arthur wrenched his sword from the hacked table. Its long blade swept through the air above his head, reflecting the roaring fire. "Where can I find him? Just tell me where, Otherworld or Hell itself, I'll kill him and bring her back. Tell me where to find him."

Easy, I told myself, we both needed to stay calm. "All right," I said, "but control yourself. Let me think on this."

Arthur put his sword back in its scabbard. There was more color in his face, and his voice softened again. "I'll need your help. With Merlin dead, no one here understands such things. But you do, don't you? My sister taught you much, I think. For the first time in my life, I hope she did."

I turned a toppled bench upright and sat down on it, throwing my cloak down to warm on the stones before the fire. "She taught me some. And what she didn't teach me, I can ask her about. I brought her head with me."

Arthur looked at me as if he thought me mad. "Her head? God preserve us." He sat on the bench beside me. "First, Kay tells me you've killed a man; now you say you have my sister's head with you, like the pagan trophies the Vodadini still keep in their brochs. God's blood, Mordred, at another time I would be angry with you."

"Perhaps, but at this time you ought to be bloody

grateful, since I think she can help us. The head is in my room."

He buried his face in his hands. "Get it, then," he said quietly.

When I returned with the teakwood chest, the hacked table and the other bench had been turned upright again, and Arthur was seated, a cup of wine in his hand. Kay and several servants stood about, their faces pale in the gloom left by the dying fire, and Regan still squatted before the hearth, running her withered hands through her hair and muttering to herself. Nobody was paying any attention to her.

"Tell me one thing," I said to Arthur as I walked past him, to put the chest down and sit cross-legged on my cloak, my back to him.

"Yes?"

I unlocked the chest, but did not open it yet. "Do you love her?"

There was silence. For some reason I was glad I could not see his face. "Yes," he finally said. "I believe I do."

Idiot. "Then why did you keep putting off the bloody wedding? You might have prevented this."

His voice was so soft now I had to strain to hear him. "I don't know. I wanted her, more than anything. It was the first time I'd wanted a woman since . . . since your mother came to my tent in disguise, when I was just a soldier. Every night, I think of her, when I'm alone in bed, and every morning when I rise, and every day." Bastard, I thought; puking, Christ-ridden, stupid, sanctimonious bastard. Why couldn't he have listened to me, then?

"But I was frightened," he continued. "I suppose that is the right word. Me, frightened of a girl, a girl who'd given her consent to become my Queen. It was all right when King Lodogron first proposed the idea, when it was just practical politics, a way to make sure the Summer Country and the other Kingdoms of the Southeast would not ally themselves with their Saxon neighbors, the way Cerdic did. I was getting older; it was time for me to marry, to sire an heir."

And to think he'd once spoken of bestowing that honor upon me, back when I was a boy and he thought me simply his nephew. Not that I cared anymore. "Go on," I said. "Tell me all, if you want my help."

"Things changed when I met her," he continued haltingly. "When I came to know her, I wanted her, and that wanting frightened me. So I put off the wedding, once, and then again and again. I don't know whether it's her I fear, or what she may think of me after our wedding night. It doesn't matter now; just get her back. I was a fool, but I do love her."

"Love's a knife, right enough," I said with strained lightness. "I found that out when I was a boy, and again since. Now you know it, too."

I opened the box and took out my mother's head. Her eyes were open and staring, glittering like polished brown stones in the firelight, living eyes in a dead face. I heard loud gasps and curses. Beside me, Regan gave a choked scream and collapsed, to lie twitching on the hearth stones. Since she wasn't actually in the fire, I ignored her.

"Hello, brother," said my mother's head, her unnatural gaze fixed over my shoulder. I did not turn around to see his reaction, for this would take all my concentration. He said nothing, but I heard the intake of his breath.

"I'm not in Hell, in case you've been wondering," continued the head. "What does that say about your faith?"

This was no time for theology or acrimonious family bickering. "How can I find her?" I demanded of the head.

The withered features drew up into even more of a grimace. "I will not tell you that. You may find your death there. I don't want you to die, Mordred."

"I don't care what you want, Mother. You'll tell me. You know you will. It's why you wanted me to bring you with me, isn't it?" Oh yes, it was clear enough now. "You knew all this would happen, and you knew I'd go after her, with your help or without it." As before, I'd said "I" rather than "Arthur," for I already knew that only I could go where she was now.

Behind me, Arthur muttered a prayer. I bit down on my own tongue, hard, then I kissed her dry lips and spat my blood into her mouth. More curses and gasps sounded from behind me, and above them, I could hear Kay saying "Jesus" over and over.

"With this kiss I bind you," I said in a thick voice. "By my blood I command you. Answer now. Tell me how to find Guinevere. Tell me how to defeat Melwas."

"Turn your ear this way," she said tonelessly, "and I will whisper what you must do." The room grew very quiet, as if they were all straining to hear what she was saying, but I doubt any of them did, or they would have reacted with even greater horror. When she was done, she shut her eyes and became a dead thing again, just so much preserved flesh and bone.

I stood up and faced the assembly, the head dangling from my fist by its long hair. Everyone recoiled from it, as though I was Perseus holding the trophy he took from Medusa. "Everybody must go," I said to Arthur. "Except you. You can stay, if you want. I'll need a knife and a chisel and a carpenter's mallet. And have someone bring me a bucket of water. But first I'll need some bread, and a cup of wine as well." The last were for my stomach, not the magic I was about to attempt.

Arthur turned to pale-faced Kay and nodded. The food and wine were brought, and then we were alone while Kay went out to fetch the tools and water. Arthur silently watched me eat and drink, giving no outward sign of the impatience I'm sure he felt. After I'd done, I held my mother's head in front of me and kissed her again on her leathery mouth. "Goodbye," I said. She didn't say anything back.

Kay came back with the tools and a tin bucket full of water. He handed them to me without looking at me, and hurriedly went out again. Before he shut the door behind him, I glimpsed soldiers and servants gathered in the courtyard. Several pointed at me and crossed themselves.

I put the head on the floor and smashed it several times with the mallet, then used the knife and the chisel to extract the teeth that still remained in the broken jaw. When I'd collected all of her teeth in a little pile on the

rushes-strewn floor, I threw the ruined head in the fire. It burned with loud pops and cracks and foul black smoke.

Arthur looked like he was going to vomit. Considering the things he'd seen in his life, this squeamishness surprised me. Better get him out of here. "If Regan was combing Guinevere's hair, the comb is probably still in her room," I said to him. "I need it."

Without a word, he rose and left. I watched the head burn. It was a charred skull now, without a lower jaw. Presumably her spirit had already returned to the Earthly Paradise, or wherever spirits go. That was one question I'd never asked her.

Arthur eventually came back carrying a fine silver comb with an ivory handle. There were several long red hairs in it. Just what I needed. I took the hairs and put them in my purse, along with my mother's teeth. The fire was burning low. I looked at Regan's crumpled form. She seemed to have stopped breathing.

An idea came to me. Mother had told me what to do, but not how to get everything I would need. Perhaps this was a grim opportunity. "Is she dead?"

Arthur walked to her and knelt at her side. "Yes," he said tonelessly, after checking her pulse. "Poor woman. We need a priest."

"Later. You better go now."

He shook his head. "I am going to come with you."

I walked over and looked him in the eye. "Only I can go where I shall have to go, Arthur. You know that. And before I go, I must do things that you do not need to watch." I pointed down at Regan. "I'll need some of her blood, before it clogs in her veins."

He blanched. "Are you mad? I'll not let you desecrate this poor creature's body, not even for Guinevere."

Still looking him directly in the eye, I spoke very softly. "Arthur, listen to me. She's dead, and what I do to her body can't harm her in heaven." Or wherever she was. "She can have full rites soon enough, but for now she can help us save her mistress. Please go, and let me do what I must. Surely there were things that Merlin did that you couldn't bring yourself to watch."

He turned away, his posture that of a much older man. "I'd thought those days over with. Will you be able to get Guinevere back?"

I wished I knew. "Yes. I swear I will." At least I managed to sound certain.

He turned and quite unexpectedly embraced me. "If you can do that, my son, I'll be in your debt forever."

*My son.* He'd called me his *son* once, but never his *son*. At another time, I might have felt something, to hear those two words from his lips. Not tonight.

"Go to the chapel and pray. For me as well as her." It was not likely to help, but at least it would make him feel better.

He left without saying anything else. I crouched beside Regan. This could only work if she was a virgin. It would take a lot of blood, and getting it from a live one wasn't practical, even if I were capable of such a murderous deed. I'd always thought that Regan resembled a very large nun; now was the time to find out if she'd lived like one. Grimacing, I slipped my hand under her

gown and up between her withered legs. Well, I'd done worse things tonight. Good, she was intact.

Poor Regan; despite her weathered peasant looks and her big bones, she'd been younger than Gwen. I had disliked her, but she deserved better than this.

She may have lost a lot of her body fat when Melwas stole her youth, but she was still very large, and it was with some difficulty that I got her up onto one of the benches, laying her out so that her head lolled off the end. I lifted it by the hair and placed the bucket under it, then let it go. Her head splashed back into the bucket. I picked up the knife and cut her throat.

After a few minutes, I lifted her head out of the red water and carried the bucket to the hearth. Then I poured the water out onto my cloak. When it was soaked, I picked it up and carefully wrung it out. Then I threw the damp garment over the remains of the fire, smothering the flames and extinguishing their light.

Darkness rushed in. "With virgin's blood and my mother's ashes," I chanted, "I command this cloak to keep me from the sight of Melwas." A blue flame played over the cloak for a moment, so briefly that it might have been a trick of my eyes as they adjusted to the sudden blackness. No, it was more than that, for the air about me became very cold, and I could feel hairs stirring all over my body. I'd managed some sort of magic. Now to see whether or not it would work.

Damn you, Guinevere, to be needing something only I can do, something at which I'm not just apt to fail, but to die a miserable, lonely death while failing. Cursing, I tried to put such thoughts out of my head, and to turn to practical consideration of the long trip that lay before, not all of which would be in this world.

It was a grey afternoon, with rain drizzling on the horizon. The landscape was dank, sedgy and treeless, a low heath rimmed with stony mountains. Over everything hung the sweetish smell of bracken, moss and sheep droppings. Since I'd passed the last farm a few miles back, there'd been no living things in sight but moor birds and scattered groups of ewes. I'd been drenched twice by sudden flurries of rain, and my cloak and tunic were soaked. If it had been colder, I'd have been forced to stop and try to make a fire, or huddle for warmth amongst the sheep.

The mound loomed in front of me, a great steep-sided hill over a hundred feet high, covered in stubby grass except where outcroppings of bare limestone showed through like weathered bones. At its summit were two menhirs supporting a horizontal granite slab. Turning my horse loose to graze as best he could, I scrambled my way wearily to the top and took shelter in the comparatively dry shadow of the huge stones. Hunching there, I wrapped myself in my wet cloak and waited for night-fall. Surprisingly, I was actually able to sleep.

I dreamed of summer, a landscape of blooming furze and bluebells and green, green grass. I lay on my back in the cool shadow of an apple tree, my head in Guinevere's lap, listening to the sweet-smelling breeze whispering in the branches and feeling her fingers in my hair.

"My love," she was saying, "my sweet, sweet love. Sing me that song they sing in Orkney, when it's a bright calm day and the men are putting out to sea."

Then I awoke, and the night was all about me, dull and dark and wet, with no moon or stars visible against the soggy black curtain of the sky. I rose and stretched, then climbed atop the horizontal slab that had been my shelter. Somewhere below me was my horse, if he'd not wandered off. Damn, but I should have tethered him. No time for that now, though.

Jumping down upon the spongy ground, I found a flat stretch of earth. I'd carried my mother's teeth with me, of course, and the strand of Guinevere's hair. Fumbling in the darkness, I finally managed to tie the hair around one finger. Then I tapped the teeth down into the mud, spreading them out to form a circle. All the time, I kept repeating Guinevere's name.

That done, I stood up. "Open the way," I said. "Open the way to the realm of Melwas. By these teeth, I say it. Teeth of my mother, open the way to the Kingdom of Teeth."

Where each of the teeth had been buried, there appeared a little point of blue flame. The ground seemed to shift a bit beneath my feet, there was a rumbling deep within the mound, and then the circle of earth marked by the points of flame fell away, revealing a narrow opening like a large rabbit hole. A wind blew out of it, and I felt colder.

Not to hesitate, that was the key, but plunge on unthinking. Sinking to my hands and knees, I scrambled there, squeezing my way through the opening. Dunvallo mocked my lack of height, but my shoulders are broad enough, and it was a bloody tight fit. I couldn't see, could barely breathe. There was dirt in my eyes, and slick clay; the passage widened, then narrowed again, and I went on scrambling and burrowing like a badger. I couldn't have backed out now if I tried, wedged deeply as I was. My arms were stuck tightly at my sides and all I could do was wriggle, no longer a badger, but a snake or a worm, writhing my way deeper within the hill. My lungs were starved for air, there was dirt in my mouth and nose, the crushing weight of the mound all about me. I'd failed, I thought, expecting to die there, enfolded in the earth.

And then, there was a vertiginous shift and I was scrambling *upwards* into stale cold air, though the tunnel had not changed direction. My hands were free, then my arms and head, with something like grass or reeds about me, as I squeezed my way up and out like a baby being born.

I lay on my back and gasped in the strange stale chill air. Finally, I was able to rise, weary and filthy and sore, my heavy cloak plastered to my body by mud and wet clay. The sky overhead was grey and featureless, like a roof of fog, and there was a dull, colorless light everywhere, not sunlight or moonlight, but a cold illumination that came from nowhere and left no shadows. As far as I could see, the low rolling landscape was carpeted by clumps of unfamiliar vegetation, not so much like stalks of grass or reed as hanks of human hair. Walking to the nearest clump, I pulled a handful free from the pebbly

soil, or whatever it was rooted in. Yes, it *was* hair, some fine and straight, some coarse and curly, some fair, some dark, most of it a dull grey. All around me, the land was an enormous scalp.

I walked for a long time through the fields of hair, feeling something like sharp little stones under my feet, for I'd left one of my boots behind in my scramble through the earth. I'd also left my sword belt there, which left me unarmed except for the dagger still stuck inside my other boot. Even invisible, I did not relish the prospect of fighting Melwas with just a knife. Well, maybe I wouldn't have to. Mother had been vague on details, but she'd indicated that I might be able to get Gwen out of this place without fighting its lord at all. First, though, I had to find his dwelling.

Where the hair thinned out, it exposed ground like a pale pebbled beach, except that the pebbles were teeth and fragments of teeth, hundreds or thousands or millions of them. Guinevere's mother had struck a foul bargain indeed. This was not the Otherworld of the Blessed Heroes, the Happy Lands, the Realm of Always Summer. There were no sweet apples here, or silver goblets filled with nectar. This was a lost place, a realm of exile for an immortal being who'd offended his fellows in some unimaginable way. I walked for hours over teeth, past clumps of hair, under that low sunless sky, looking for the habitation of the one who ruled this unnatural land.

My walking was not aimless. The strand of Guinevere's hair that I'd tied around my finger tightened like an unbreakable wire, digging into my flesh whenever I strayed from the right course. I held my hand outstretched before me and stumbled in whatever direction brought the least pain, my cloak dragging behind me like soggy wings. Finally, something large and pale and shapeless loomed on the low horizon.

The building, if I can call it a building, seemed to grow out of the landscape, a huge tumbled edifice the color of bone and ivory. It grew slowly in size as I walked, and kept on growing, until I thought I'd never reach it, or be driven mad by its sheer immensity when I did. Finally, I stood before it, and craned my head up at the structure that loomed over me like a mountain. It had no plan or design; it was just an artificial hill, like the mound I'd burrowed into in our world, but much larger, and made of teeth rather than of earth, unimaginable numbers of teeth all mortared together into a kind of cement, with the only feature a great doorless entrance like the mouth of the Cyclops' cave.

In tales of Arawn, that aspect of the Otherworld that lies over the western sea, those who displease the fair folk are imprisoned in the dreadful dungeon called Oeth and Anoeth, which is made from human bones. I doubted that Oeth and Anoeth could be more terrible than the mountain of teeth that stood before me now. This was the Palace of Melwas, his stronghold, the place where he held Gwen. There was no point in waiting. I drew my damp, dirty cloak about me, hoping its magic still worked.

"Come out, Melwas," I yelled in a hoarse voice. "Come out if you dare."

Nothing stirred for a long time, so long that I thought

I might have to go in after him, when he finally came lurching into view. I immediately wished he had not, for his appearance was even worse than I'd imagined. Think of one of the shriveled, leathery corpses that are sometimes dug out of peat bogs, only *stretched* like a piece of unrendered suet and imbued with unnatural life. Though he could not have weighed much more than me, he tottered forward on stilts like legs that gave him twice my height, and he had equally long arms and a long thin, wattled neck, the latter somehow supporting a huge round head that resembled a withered gourd. His exposed scrotum was a tiny shriveled pouch, and I could count every rib in his gaunt sides, for his only garment was a kind of cloak or mantle made from teeth, strung together like a beaded curtain, which rattled when he walked. In one hand he held a long crooked staff, the end of which was decorated with discolored molar, their roots driven into the wood and their crowns pointing outwards to form knobby spikes.

Oh, Jesus, I said to myself, I'll believe in you and be yours always, if you don't let this thing see me. Silently, I directed similar pleas to Lugh, Mithras and even the Odin of the Saxons. And you, Mother, it was your dark skills that brought me here; don't fail me now, smirking ghost that you are. If you ever loved me, don't fail me now.

The magic must have worked, for he looked right at me with eyes like flat black buttons and did not see me. I steadied myself as he came closer, and marveled at the intricate web of wrinkles that creased his scrawny frame, for he was as shriveled as a prune. Every part of him except his eyes was covered in dust, and he smelled not like carrion as I would have expected, but like the air in a long boarded-up unused room. As he stalked past me, his staff swung very close to where I stood, but I did not flinch, for fear I'd make some sound and give myself away. The very proximity of the staff made my bones ache, and I could only imagine what its touch might do to me.

Two yards from me, he paused and stood there, his black eyes looking at nothing in particular, his slit of a mouth hanging slackly open, exposing a toothless cavity the color of old meat. It seemed ironic that the Lord of Teeth would have none of his own, but I managed to keep myself from laughing. He stood there for a long time, his head tilting to one side, and then he began to shuffle slowly and aimlessly forward into the fields of hair.<sup>4</sup>

Slowly, carefully, I moved towards the entrance to his palace. It wasn't so much a hall or a corridor as a tunnel, walled and floored in the inevitable teeth. The bare sole of my right foot was cut and bleeding, and I was limping after ten steps, but I hurried on, surprised that I didn't have to grope my way in darkness. Fortunately, the same colorless light suffused everything as it had outside, and I had no problem seeing where I was going.

The passage branched out, then branched out again, I passed low-ceilinged chambers and the entrances to other passages, but the hair wrapped so tightly around my finger did not fail me, and I always knew what fork to take, which passage to choose. Soon, I was deep with-



in that terrible palace. I don't remember much of it, just corridor after corridor, irregular chamber after chamber, like cells in a honeycomb. How did Melwas make his gangling life through such cramped space?

Abruptly, I rounded a corner and was in a vast open space, a room so large that Arthur's palace could have fit inside. Great columns of teeth shot up to a rough ceiling a hundred feet or more above my head. In the center of this huge chamber was a sort of crude throne, also made of teeth, and covered with a blanket woven from different colored strands of hair. All about the throne, pits were sunk in the floor, like silos for storing grain. I limped among them and peered down, barely conscious of the growing pain in my right foot.

Many of the pits had occupants. Here a woman huddled, nude and gaunt, thin arms wrapped around scarred and scabby knees, downturned face veiled by dusty, colorless hair. Here were two children in rags, clutching each other and looking up at nothing with a mindless, frightened stare. Here something pale moved feebly on the toothed floor, a spindly, big-headed thing no larger than a kitten. A miscarriage, perhaps? I passed more women, most of them of indeterminate age, either naked or in rags, all of them covered with sores, all seemingly leeching of life and color. Above several pits, I paused and hissed. Only two of the occupants looked up, and neither had any awareness in her eyes. Most were covered in dust, and some looked like they had not moved in a long time, yet they all appeared alive. Well, it was probably impossible to die here, no matter how long one went without food or drink. Who were they? Had they all been promised to the lord of this place, the way Guinevere had? I never found out.

However they had come here, Melwas had collected them in much the same way that a magpie collects shiny baubles. They were not slaves or concubines, or even livestock, just pretty trinkets to be carried off, then thrown into pits and forgotten. Christians believe that devils will torment them in Hell, but is torment worse than mindless neglect?

Suddenly, the hair tied round my finger loosened and fell away. Looking into the pit directly in front of me, I saw Guinevere. Even covered with dust and cobwebs, her hair stood out like a flame. She crouched there in a plain woolen shift, obviously what she'd been wearing when Melwas had taken her, her head resting on her knees. "Thank you," I said aloud, to all the gods I'd prayed to, and Mother's ghost besides.

Guinevere looked up, green eyes streaked with red. "Mordred!"

Well, my cloak was not supposed to make me invisible to human eyes. I almost wished it did, for I must have looked a sight. "Aye, love," I whispered, "it's me. I've come to take you home."

How I was going to manage that, I wasn't sure. *She'll tell you what to do when you find her* had been the last words from Mother's dead lips.

I was still thinking it over when I heard a rattling sound behind me and turned, to see Melwas standing there, vacant black eyes tracking the bloody footprints I'd left

upon the jagged floor. His staff snaked out, not so much towards me as towards the red smear beside my right foot, but that proved near enough. I ducked forward like an idiot, overbalanced, and toppled into the pit.

My cloak caught on the edge and for a moment I hung there, dashed against the pit's side, gasping and twisting and feeling roots and broken crowns scraping into my thigh and shoulder. Then my brooch tore loose and I fell, leaving the cloak behind me. Fortunately, the drop was only about twelve feet, and I landed bruised and cut but not seriously injured. Scrambling painfully to my feet, I drew my dagger and I glared up at Melwas.

He looked down at us with his black shark's eyes. The slit that was his mouth spread and spread, becoming a wound that split his face. He began to make a high, keening sound that I finally recognized as laughter.

"What, you think I'm funny?" I snarled, no longer quite in my right mind. "Come on down here and I'll show you how funny I am!"

His only response was to rasp deep in his throat, as if attempting to hawk up phlegm or spittle. Then he coughed, a dry explosion of dust and stale air. Giving us a grin and a cock of his head, he shambled out of view. What, that was all, he was just going to leave us here? Well, why not? It wasn't as if we'd be able to climb out, unless Gwen stood on my shoulders. I turned to her to suggest the possibility.

"You came after me," she said, and then she was in my arms, and it was so good to be holding her, even under these circumstances, that all I could do was stand there, and feel my arms about her and her body pressed against, and take pleasure in that feeling. For the second time, I was ashamed of what a filthy mess I was, but she seemed not to mind. "You came," she said again. "I knew that if anybody could, it would be you."

I actually managed a sour laugh at that. "Fat lot of good I've done both of us."

She hugged me tighter. "Is Regan all right? That monster struck her with his staff. After that, I don't remember anything, until I woke up here."

"She's fine," I lied. Letting go of her, I stepped back and gave her a closer look. There were dark hollows under her eyes, and her hair was a tangled rat's nest. Her shift was torn and dirty, and she stank of sweat and urine and was covered in dust. God, but she looked beautiful for all of that.

Taking my hand, she sat down again, gently pulling me towards her. "Lie here, with me."

I knelt beside her. "Gwen, we've got to get out of this place."

She put her finger to my lips. "I know. Make love to me."

"What?"

She was practically pulling me down on top of her. "It's our only chance. Don't you see? My virginity binds me here. Make love to me. Do something that means life and the flesh, here, in this place so far from either. Break the spell. Fuck me." Incredibly, she was already fumbling clumsily with my filthy breeches.

What I'd wanted in my dreams, what I saw behind my eyelids when I lay in bed at night, was actually about to

happen. It was insane, of course, but there was nothing else to do. And it might work. And if it didn't, it would make death easier to face. At least, that's what I told myself.

She'd gotten my breeches down. I kissed her, probed with my tongue, found hers as she pulled her shift up about her waist. The roots and broken crowns of the teeth set in the floor must have hurt her backside even more than they hurt my knees, but she gave no sign of discomfort. Our mouths separated to let her pull the shift over her head. Normally, she seemed very pale, but naked here in this pale place, there was a ruddiness about her, the glow of life itself. She'd undone my belt. I threw off my sodden tunic and kicked off the breeches that were about my ankles.

I'm not sure how we managed, unless the desperation itself drove us into passion, but I became fully aroused, and she was wet when I went inside her. It was clumsy, of course, and fumbling, and I must have hurt her, badly even, but she shuddered through it and held me tight. I remembered what I'd told her, in the amphitheater so long ago. The Otherworld wasn't just a place. It was a part of us, of everyone. If we changed ourselves, we could change it, or at least this aspect of it.

Her nails dug into my back. "Melwas," she gasped, "with this act I renounce my mother's bargain. You've no claim on me, or on this man who came after me!"

As I came, as we came, I heard a sound from above us, like rusty metal screaming. Rolling off her, I looked up, to see Melwas perched on the edge of the pit, glaring down at us, his mouth twisted open like a hole torn in a leather bag. "No," he said, the only word I ever heard him speak. Then the floor of teeth lurched beneath us, and the air grew dark, and Melwas and the circle of pale light around him were getting smaller and smaller, and I realized that the bottom of the pit had fallen away, and we were falling with it, falling and falling. Then it was just black vertigo and loose teeth all around us; I could still feel Gwen's hand and I tried to call her name, but there were teeth and bits of teeth in my mouth and a great weight on me, and then I didn't know anything else.

When I awoke, aching but alive, we were back in our world, lying atop the mound in the cold rain, naked, our clothes beside us and dawn breaking on the horizon. We were both cut and bruised all over, and half buried in a great wash of mud and teeth, as if the hill itself had vomited us out. Perhaps it had.

Guinevere sat up before I did, looking like someone who'd just clawed her way out of a grave. "Oh, God," she said finally. "We're alive!" Then she was on top of me, hugging me again, which was torture on my bruised ribs. "Jesus and the Saints, Mordred, we did it!"

Mother had been right when she'd said Gwen would tell me what to do. The spell had been broken, and that aspect of the Otherworld that was the realm of Melwas had spat or shat us out. I'd never seen a cold and rainy morning look so bloody lovely. It was over, I told myself, all over, except for the long walk home. I held her then in the mud, her dirty hair in my face, held her tight and let the rain wash us clean.

After a while, we stood. I pointed at the ancient stones. "There's shelter there, until the rain stops."

She shook her head, tangled hair in her eyes. "No. We'll leave now."

"Jesus, Gwen, we'll catch our deaths!" It was stupid, to risk letting the weather kill us, after what we'd been through. Besides, I wasn't sure how far I could walk. "The nearest farm is at least four miles back."

Naked there, in the dawning of that dreary November day, she was like a goddess. And goddesses are not to be denied. "I'll not stay here," she said through clenched teeth. "This mound is his, and I want to be away from it. We can rest in a ditch, if need be."

I held up her shift and my tunic. "Well, these won't be much comfort, but they're better than being naked. Perhaps the farmer can spare some clothes."

It was indeed a long and painful walk, and I managed the better part of it with my arm around Gwen's shoulders, as she steadied me and helped take the weight off my injured foot. In Orkney or the north, we'd have probably caught a chill and died, walking in wet rags at that time of year, but the weather is mild in the south lands, even in November. The farmer turned out to be sympathetic, or at least afraid of my knife, and he gave us a sack and an old, much-mended cloak, and the use of his barn until the rain stopped.

It rained until late in the day, but we kept warm in the loft, lying naked together on the cloak, which I'd spread across the hay. "Let's do it again," said Gwen. "What we did to break the spell. We can take our time, and it won't hurt this time." Not an unappealing prospect, although I was surprised that she had the strength. I kissed her, and was completely, ineffably happy, there in the warm, sneeze-inducing hay, with things scurrying about us and rain water dripping here and there through the timbers of the roof. A bed chamber in the finest palace in Byzantium could not have been more comfortable.

Afterwards, we lay together, her head resting on my chest, her skin so pale next to my own. "We can go to Brittany," I finally said.

"What?" She sat up, brushing hay out of her hair. "We're going back to Camelot."

I started to pull on my clothes, which, if not clean, were drier than they had been. "You're not still marrying Arthur," I protested. "You don't love him."

She rested her chin on her lovely knees. "No, I don't. And maybe I do love you."

I looked at her. "That's my point. Damn it, Gwen, you've been rescued from the Otherworld. Live now for yourself in this one. Do what will make you happy."

She looked down at her feet, her toes curling in the straw, her hair cascading over her face and shoulders. "That's what I'm doing, Mordred. I'm not some noble lady in a story, like Deirdre of the Sorrows, ready to renounce my worldly position for the sake of love. There's not much for a woman in this life, and I've a chance to be a Queen. I've been hurt and frightened, offered like a sacrifice to old powers, a tool first of my mother's vanity and then my father's political ambitions. Now I want something for myself, some comfort and control, some

power, damn it. Is that selfish? What would you do, if you were me?"

I shook my head sadly. "I don't know." Brittany had been just a daydream, of course; I had known it when I spoke it.

"I once said I wouldn't be like one of the old Roman ladies," she continued, "and have a troop of lovers in my bed. I will have one, though, if he'll have me. Lord knows, we're sure to get the opportunity. Arthur won't let himself get tied down at court."

That was dangerous. If we went to Arthur now, and told him what had transpired, he would surely renounce his claim on her, and not seek vengeance, no matter what he felt. But if we cuckolded him after the wedding, that would be a different story. Besides, there were less tangible considerations.

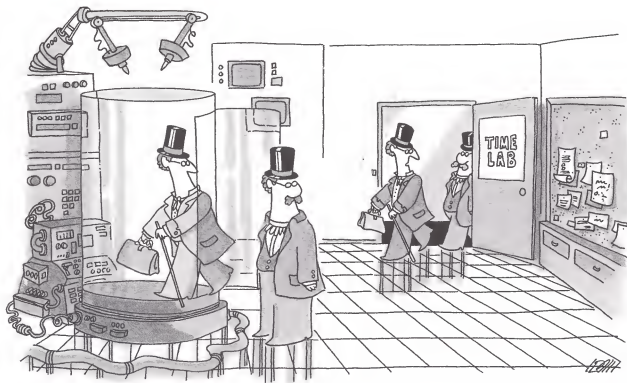
"I don't think I can share you."

She reached out and stroked my cheek. "I'm sorry, then. You came after me, when no one else could. And I've wanted you for a long time. You deserve better of me, I know."

I brushed my lips against her finger, then pulled back. "No, it's enough," I lied, "that I did what I did, and we've had this. When we've rested, we can start back. It's a long walk, I'm afraid."

And that's how it started, her and me, first on a floor of teeth and later in a pile of straw. Nor did it stop there, despite what I'd said about not sharing her. Even then, we both knew it wouldn't stop there. That's the truth of it. Arthur hurt me once, a long time ago, and nothing much has hurt me since. When love happened between her and me it happened *because* of her and me, not because of him. Don't think otherwise. This was not revenge for the way he'd rejected me, that long gone day in Orkney. I'm not acting out an incestuous tragedy by Sophocles or some other long-dead boy-loving Greek. I'm just me, Mordred, my own self and not part of any story.

No thought of such things then, though. Indeed, I didn't think of the future at all. Instead, I lay there in the hay, holding her and listening to the rain. ♦



"Okay, we'd hoped to travel back to 1840 London, and instead we only traveled five minutes back in time. At least we still have the distinction of being the first and only time travelers . . ."

# AMAZING<sup>®</sup> STORIES

## Back Issues and Anthologies

If you like what you've seen in this issue of AMAZING<sup>®</sup> Stories, there's more where it came from. We have a small selection of back issues dating from the 1970s, plus every magazine from May 1990 through January 1993, available for purchase by mail order. The list on this page and the facing page mentions every magazine that's for sale, and gives a few of the stories you'll find in each one.

The list also includes six paperback anthologies that were produced by TSR, Inc., in 1985 through 1987, reprinting many classic stories from older issues—a great way to pick up a representative collection of what was being printed in the good old days. Also available is another anthology, *Cinemonsters*, which is described in detail on the following page.

All of the anthologies and most of the magazines are in mint condition. Among the copies of any single back issue, the magazines in mint condition are sold first. Every publication has a money-back guarantee—if you aren't satisfied with what you get, send back the merchandise you don't want and we'll reimburse you for the price of the item(s) plus the return postage.

Prices of the digest-sized magazines vary according to age, with the older issues costing less than the newer ones (because the cover price of the older magazines was lower).

After you've totaled the prices for the old magazines you want, add on a postage charge of \$1.00 for the first issue and 50¢ for each additional issue through the tenth one. If you order more than ten digest-sized magazines, you don't pay any additional postage charge.

The new-format, full-sized issues, beginning with May 1991, are priced at a flat rate of \$5.00 each, which includes postage. (Prices for the anthologies also have postage costs built in.)

To make an order, write out clearly and legibly the magazines you want, calculate the total cost, and enclose a check or money order for that amount. Send your order to the magazine's business office (P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147). All orders will be shipped via third-class mail or UPS within two days of receipt.

If we can't fill your order because of sold-out issues, we'll reserve for you the issues we can sell you; then we'll send back your check or money order and ask you to send us exact payment for the items we can provide for you.

As an option, you can ask to receive one or more of the anthologies as a replacement for back issues that might be sold out. If you like this idea, just tell us the anthologies you'd like to have, in order of preference, and we'll make sure that you get your money's worth.

### DIGEST-SIZED MAGAZINES

— \$1.25 each —

#### September 1972 18 copies

*Fat City* by Ross Rocklynne; *Deflation 2001* by Bob Shaw; *Proof* by F. M. Busby; *Jupiter Project* (first of two parts) by Gregory Benford

#### January 1973 33 copies

*The Ascending Aye* by Gordon Eklund; *Night Shift* by George R. R. Martin; *On Ice* by Barry N. Malzberg; *Close Your Eyes and Stare at Your Memories* by A. G. Moran

#### August 1973 45 copies

*To Walk With Thunder* by Dean McLaughlin; *The Once and Always War* by Gerard F. Conway; *Up Against the Wall* by Robert Thurston; *They Roar* by Clark Cox

— \$1.50 each —

#### November 1978 12 copies

*While the North Wind Blows* by Christopher Anvil; *Green Thumb* by Marion Zimmer Bradley; *Last Rocket from Newark* by Jack C. Haldeman II

— \$1.75 each —

#### May 1990

*Giant, Giant Steps* by Robert Frazier; *Computer Portrait* by Jayge Carr; *Fatal Disk Error* by George Alec Effinger

#### July 1990

*Harvest* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch; *The Secret of Life* by David Brin; *Sequoia Dreams* by Sheila Finch

## September 1990

*Harlem Nova* by Paul Di Filippo; *At Vega's Taqueria* by Richard A. Lupoff; *Whoso List to Hunt* by Susan Shwartz

## November 1990

*When the Ship Comes In* by R. Garcia y Robertson; *Command Performance* by Kathi Koja; *Behind the Eyes of Dreamers* by Pamela Sargent

## January 1991

*Stranger Suns* (Part One) by George Zebrowski; *A Painting Lesson* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman; *Life in a Drop of Pond Water* by Bruce Bethke

## March 1991

*Dog's Life* by Martha Soukup; *The Dragon of Aller* by John Brunner; *Stranger Suns* (Conclusion) by George Zebrowski

### FULL-SIZED MAGAZINES

—\$5.00 each (includes postage)—

## May 1991

*A Tip on a Turtle* by Robert Silverberg; *Change of Face* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Kevin J. Anderson; *The Ghost Taker* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Klept* by John Brunner

## June 1991

*Victoria* by Paul Di Filippo; *Hitmen—See Murderers* by Timothy Zahn; *The Sixty-Five Million Year Sleep* by Sharon N. Farber; *the button, and what you know* by W. Gregory Stewart

## July 1991

*Except My Life, Except My Life, Except My Life* by John Morressy; *Arms and the Woman* by James Morrow; *The Perfect Hero* by Elizabeth Moon

## August 1991

*Fantasies* by Michael Swanwick and Tim Sullivan; *The Number of the Sand* by George Zebrowski; *The Face of the Waters* by Robert Silverberg

## September 1991

*Death Link* by Gene DeWeese and L. A. Taylor; *The Storming Bone* by Ian McDowell; *Thomas and the Wise Men* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

## October 1991

*Skin Deep* by Brian Stableford; *The Drifter* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Line Item on a Dead Grant* by Jack C. Haldeman II

## November 1991 LIMITED SUPPLY

*The Implanted Man* by F. M. Busby; *The Year of the Guns—Part Two* by Rick Shelley; *The Character Assassin* by Paul Cook

## December 1991

*Word Salad* by Phillip C. Jennings; *Touche* by Gregory Benford; *The Long Fall* by Ben Bova; *The Devil His Due* by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

## January 1992

*The Round-Eyed Barbarians* by L. Sprague de Camp; *Natural Selection* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *The Sleeping Serpent* by Pamela Sargent

## February 1992

*Complications* by Brian Stableford; *In Brass Valley* by Avram Davidson; *If There Be Cause* by Sheila Finch; *The Final Page* by Phillip C. Jennings

## March 1992

*Let Time Shape* by George Zebrowski; *The Call* by John Morressy; *Hiatius* by Alexis Glynn Latner; *Reawakening* by Mark J. McGarry

## April 1992

*Missing Person* by William F. Wu; *Life in the Air* by Barry N. Malzberg and Jack Dann; *Isabella of Castile Answers Her Mail* by James Morrow

## May 1992

*Blades of the Diram Ring* by Barry B. Longyear; *Messages Left on a Two-Way Mirror* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

## June 1992

*The Last Reunion* by Harry Turtledove; *Little Brother's Turn to Watch* by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.; *The Red World and the Blue* by Ben Bova

## July 1992

*The Vortex* by Phillip C. Jennings; *Lennon Spex* by Paul Di Filippo; *In and Out With Me* by John Morressy; *My Father's Face* by Ian McDowell

## August 1992

*Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love* by Roger Zelazny; *The Logic of Location* by Alexander Jablokov; *Last Wish* by Martha Soukup

## September 1992

### LIMITED SUPPLY

*The Rock That Changed Things* by Ursula K. Le Guin; *Deconstruction Gang* by Harry Turtledove; *The Green* by Barry B. Longyear

## October 1992

*A Troll of Surewould Forest* (Part One) by Thomas M. Disch; *Kent State Descending the Gravity Well* by James Alan Gardner; *Broken Highway* by J. R. Dunn

## November 1992

*Relics* by Gail Regier; *I Walked With Fidel* by George Zebrowski; *A Troll of Surewould Forest* (Part Two) by Thomas M. Disch

## December 1992

*Chimaera* by Barry B. Longyear; *The Coming of the Spear* by Don Webb; *A Troll of Surewould Forest* (Part Three) by Thomas M. Disch

## January 1993

*Windance* by Doug Beason; *Mama Told Me Not to Come* by Paul Di Filippo; *Goldilocks and the Virtual Bears* by W. Gregory Stewart

### —ANTHOLOGIES—

(prices include postage)

### AMAZING® Stories: 60 Years of the Best Science Fiction \$8.00

Stories by David H. Keller, Miles J. Breuer, Nelson Bond, Eando Binder, Robert Bloch, Robertheckley, Walter M. Miller, Jr., Isaac Asimov, Edmond Hamilton, Mark Clifton, Cordwainer Smith, Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, Ron Goulart, John Jakes, Philip José Farmer, James Tiptree, Jr., John Varley, and Pat Murphy. 255 pages, trade paperback.

### AMAZING® Stories: Visions of Other Worlds \$8.00

Stories by Harlan Ellison, Paul W. Fairman, Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore, Jack Vance, Poul Anderson, Edmond Hamilton, Robert Bloch, Kris Neville, Arthur C. Clarke, Piers Anthony, James Blish, Cordwainer Smith, Robert Silverberg, Horace L. Gold, and Gregory Benford. 253 pages, trade paperback. **LIMITED SUPPLY.**

### The Wonder Years: 1926-1935 \$4.00

Stories by Jack Williamson, Neil R. Jones, Edmond Hamilton, Francis Flagg, Julian Huxley, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, G. Peyton Wertenbaker, Clare Winger Harris, Miles J. Breuer, Amelia Reynolds Long, Clark Ashton Smith, John W. Campbell, Jr., and H. P. Lovecraft. 320 pages, paperback.

### The War Years: 1936-1945 \$4.00

Stories by Isaac Asimov, Edmond Hamilton, William F. Temple, Don Wilcox, Eando Binder, Ralph Milne Farley, John Wyndham, W. K. Sonnemann, Stanley G. Weinbaum, and Ray Bradbury. 334 pages, paperback.

### The Wild Years: 1946-1955 \$4.00

Stories by Robert Bloch, Philip K. Dick, H. Beam Piper, Isaac Asimov, Robertheckley, Ward Moore, Walter M. Miller, Jr., Jerome Bixby, Theodore Sturgeon, Clifford D. Simak, Ross Rocklynne, and Ray Bradbury. 320 pages, paperback.

### FANTASTIC™ Stories: Tales of the Weird & Wondrous \$8.00

Stories by Robert Bloch, Robert F. Young, J. G. Ballard, George R. R. Martin, Judith Merril, Reginald Bretton, Poul Anderson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Lester del Rey, David R. Bunch, Philip K. Dick, Isaac Asimov, John Brunner, Roger Zelazny, Ron Goulart, and James E. Gunn. 253 pages, trade paperback.

### CINEMONSTERS \$8.00

Twelve classic stories that were turned into "monster movies," plus an introduction by Charles G. Waugh and an appendix giving more information about the films. Fiction by John W. Campbell, Jr., Edgar Allan Poe, M. R. James, Ray Bradbury, Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, H. G. Wells, H. P. Lovecraft, Theodore Sturgeon, O. Henry, Bram Stoker, and James Blish. 319 pages, trade paperback.

## **Coming in March**

### **The Knot** by Elisabeth Vonarburg

After a multitude of Voyages to other worlds and times,  
she finally realizes the simple truth about herself.

### **Men of Good Will** by J. R. Dunn

The Roman Empire has evolved along a different course,  
but some things apparently can never be changed.

plus . . .

### **Dover Beach** by Tony Daniel

### **A Little Waltz Music** by Arlan Andrews, Sr.

### **Old Soldiers Never Die** by Barry B. Longyear

and even more  
fiction, facts, and features!



The thrilling prequel to the  
best-selling *Dark Horse* and

## *Lightning's Daughter*

# Valorian

Prequel to the best-seller *Dark Horse*



\$4.50 U.S. \$5.50 CAN. £3.99 U.K.

Nearly five hundred years before the time of *Gabria*, the once-mighty Clans dwindle under the cruel heel of the Tarnish Empire and its military governor. Only one man, Valorian, dares to dream of freedom – and few are willing to listen.

Not until Valorian is granted a gift of sorcery from the goddess Amara is he able to begin his quest. If he can unite his people and escape from the ruthless General Tyrranis, Valorian may find a new destiny for the Clan. But if he fails, the clanspeople face certain death. . . .

Mary H. Herbert's newest book, *Valorian*, is available in February at book and hobby stores everywhere.

ISBN 1-56076-566-6

Sug. Retail \$4.50/CAN \$5.50/£3.99 U.K.



TSR is a registered trademark owned by TSR, Inc. ©1993 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.



## At last, the saga of Krynn's dwarven clans is told!

The Dwarven Nations Trilogy  
Volume One



### the Covenant of the forge

Dan parkinson

An ill wind blows across Ansalon. Hordes of outsiders, fleeing the Dragon Wars, invade the countryside. Evil magic abounds.

In its midst, a bold visionary leads his Hylar tribe in the pursuit of a new home.

Their quest takes them to the Kharolis Mountains, where the Hylar unite the feuding dwarven clans and forge the new nation of Thorbardin. Yet there is to be no peace... a civil war erupts, a curse is fulfilled, and a child is born destined to become the Father of Kings.

Look for **The Covenant of the Forge**, the first book in the eagerly awaited Dwarven Nations Trilogy, by Dan Parkinson, at book and hobby stores everywhere.

ISBN 1-56076-558-5  
Sug. Retail \$4.95/CAN \$5.95/  
£3.99 U.K.



## NEW FROM TSR!

DRAGONLANCE is a registered trademark owned by TSR, Inc. The TSR logo is a trademark owned by TSR, Inc. ©1993 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This Scan  
is Courtesy  
of the  
dtsq0318 Collection